

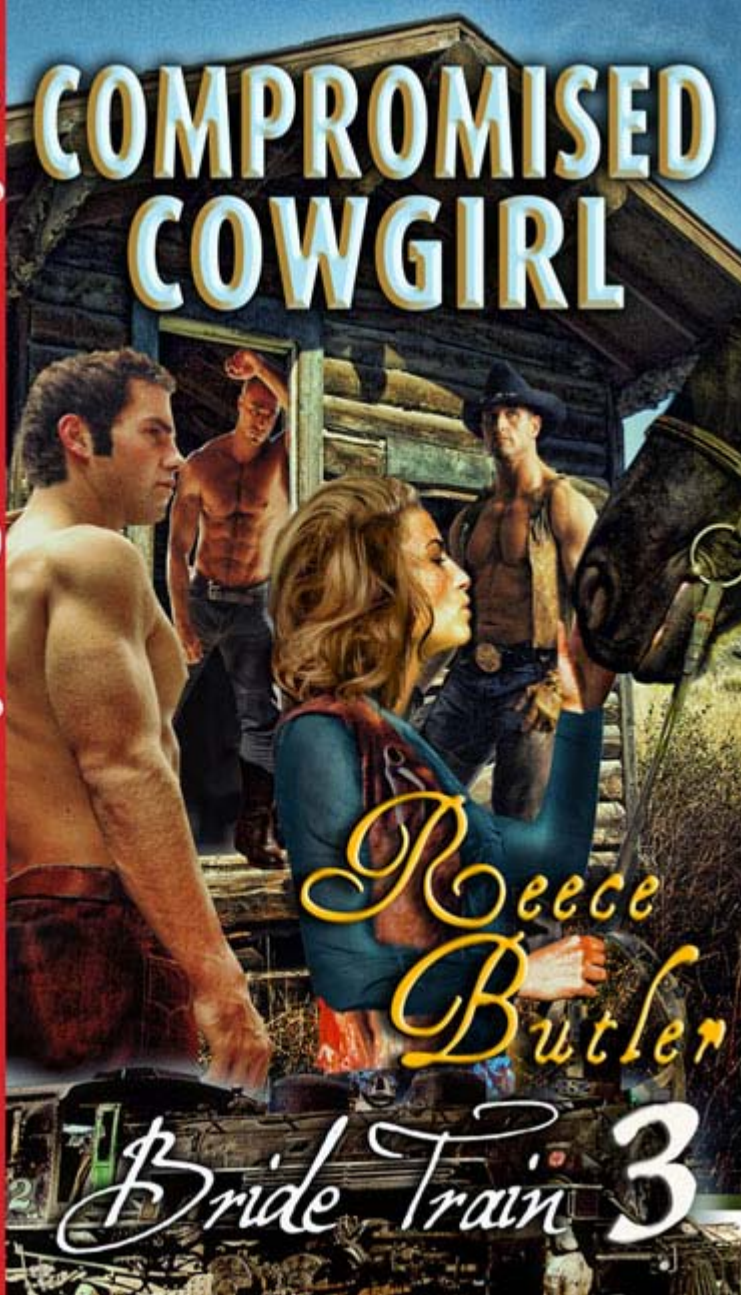
SIREN
Publishing

Ménage Everlasting

COMPROMISED COWGIRL

*Reece
Butler*

Bride Train 3



Bride Train 3

Compromised Cowgirl

Having completed two years at a Virginia ladies' college, required to gain her inheritance, Jessamine Elliott returns to Tanner's Ford. Raised on a ranch with six wild brothers, she's determined to keep her independence by becoming a partner on her brothers' Bitterroot Ranch. But Ranger insists she prove herself by spending three weeks working for the Double Diamond, owned by a trio of greenhorn English aristocrats, posing as a boy.

At Ranger's urging, Kenrick 'Ace' Langford reluctantly takes Jessie on, thinking she's a bratty boy but needing the skills. His partners see through Jessie's disguise but go along with the ruse, hoping they will marry. Ace feels strangely drawn to Jessie so stays far away. Three weeks later he thinks he's finally free of the brat when he finds Jessie floating in his hot spring. When the uppity brat rolls over, showing lush breasts, Ace decides it's payback time.

Genre: Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

Length: 86,007 words

COMPROMISED COWGIRL

Bride Train 3

Reece Butler

MENAGE EVERLASTING



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

COMPROMISED COWGIRL

Copyright © 2011 by Reece Butler

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-496-0

First E-book Publication: May 2011

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

All art and logo copyright © 2011 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Compromised Cowgirl* by Reece Butler from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Reece Butler's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Butler's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

As always, to Paul, Andy and David, the three men in my life.

I'd like to thank my mother, Frances who, at 82, respects and enjoys my work.

This is also for Kathy, who's been my friend and a shoulder to whine on for about fifteen years now. There's been a lot of water under the bridge, but at least we're not drowning yet.

I must thank the Montana Heritage Commission for creating Nevada City's 'living museum' of buildings and artifacts. I spent two full days questioning Dan (Curator of Living History), John, and the other volunteers. They made this historical site come alive for me.

Check their site at <http://www.virginiacitymt.com/LivHistory.asp>

Any errors in this manuscript are my own.

COMPROMISED COWGIRL

Bride Train 3

REECE BUTLER

Copyright © 2011

Chapter One

Late August 1871, Montana Territory

Kenrick “Ace” Langford, youngest son of the Earl of Denby, wiped his forehead and settled his cowboy hat. Though exhausted to the bone, he sat tall. Langfords didn’t slouch.

Charles Statham, known to his friends as “Sin,” towered beside him, riding Emperor, his equally large Friesian stallion. The huge black horse was a parting gift from his father. The man insisted Charles’ size must be due to his wife’s affair with a blacksmith. Days before leaving England, Sin saw a portrait of his maternal grandfather and realized he came by his size naturally. As Sin was merely the spare to his older brother and no use to the family, the revelation was irrelevant. Emperor, however, had value.

“Dayam, ain’t that a purdy sight,” said Henry Bennett, the third partner and ninth child of a Baron. “We shore done good.”

“Can you not speak the King’s English?” Ace muttered through gritted teeth.

“It was your idea to leave the King, along with the rest of bloody England, behind,” replied Henry. He grinned in response to Ace’s ongoing complaint. “Why don’t you learn to speak Western, instead?”

“Because I was raised to be a gentleman, as were you.” Ace’s horse tossed his head, picking up his rider’s agitation. “One does not change one’s standards just because one is exposed to the lower elements of society.”

Henry snorted, a sound that would not have been tolerated in England. “The only thing that attitude will give you is a punch in the face. We’re Montana Territory ranchers now.”

“I am not a chameleon, willing to blend in and hide.”

“At least we didn’t have to go all the way to Texas to get our cattle,” said Sin, interrupting the ongoing argument. “To think that a simple card game brought us all this.”

“Simple? It took me until dawn until the fool finally lost everything.” Ace raised an eyebrow at Sin. “Smythe, though he came from the lower classes, reminded me of my father in his greed.”

Frederick Smythe had a hatred of men such as Ace, who he considered privileged and slothful. Now that he was off England’s soil, Smythe’s new wealth encouraged his rage, driving him to make wild bets against sneering aristocrats.

Ace, calm and cool, matched him game for game. About sunup, with everything on the table, Smythe roared in triumph. He slammed down two pair, kings and queens. He leaned forward to take the table full of gold, markers for his Double Diamond ranch, and herd of Texas longhorns.

But Langford held up his hand, stopping Smythe. The cheering room went silent as, one by one, he laid his cards down. Ace of diamonds. Ace of spades. Ace of hearts.

Three of a kind beat two pair. Everything on the table went to Kenrick Langford.

That game brought the three partners a ranch and cattle, and Ace’s nickname. Unfortunately, it also brought the wrath of a powerful man. Smythe’s eyes shouted the threats his mouth would not speak in public.

But Kenrick Langford had never stood down from a fight. Neither

had his partners. Whatever Smythe threw at them, they could handle. Even if they didn't yet know how to throw a lasso or brand a calf.

"We should place an advertisement in *The Montana Post* and thank Mr. Smythe publicly for his involuntary generosity," said Henry.

"That sounds like something your oldest sister would do," said Sin.

"Where do you think I get my best ideas?"

Sin turned to Ace. "When are the ranch hands arriving?"

Ace stared straight ahead as if he hadn't heard. After a moment Sin and Henry shifted in their saddles.

"You *did* find a couple of men in town?" Henry looked from Ace to Sin, and back. He groaned. "Tell me we're not going to have to figure out how to do this all by ourselves."

"Why should one work for low wages when one can find gold by walking along a creek?" said Ace sarcastically, imitating the miners. He ignored Henry's cursing. "We can do it." Ace looked at his partners, friends since childhood. "We *will* do it."

"Of course," said Sin.

"This is our future. All we need is effort and time." Henry shifted on his saddle. "Though, a wife would be pleasant to come home to. Give me another few days of practice, and I'll be roping cattle better than Ranger Elliott."

Ace coughed back a laugh. He was determined, not a fool. They'd helped the Elliott and MacDougal ranchers since they arrived in the valley that spring, learning what they could. Henry's roping was worse than his, but barely. At six-foot-six, Sin's long arms, height, and great strength gave him an advantage, but it would be years before they were as proficient as any of the Elliots. After all, the others had been working this land since before John and Patsy Tanner stopped at the river and created Tanner's Ford.

The new owners of a herd of half-wild Texas longhorns let the knowledge of their next challenge settle onto their broad shoulders.

They sat tall and watched Ranger Elliott ride toward them with an ease of a lifetime in the saddle.

Whatever had to be done, they would do. As younger sons, useless unless the heir died, they had no purpose. No one had believed in them except each other. Over the years their individual abilities meshed to form a good team.

Their children would inherit a working ranch. Unlike their older brothers, fathers, and uncles, they wouldn't need to relieve their boredom by chasing foxes across fields, destroying the grain people needed to eat. No, they had work aplenty to keep them busy.

"While you're counting that herd, remember half belongs to the Bitterroot Ranch," said Ranger drily. He nodded to each man and reined in beside Sin. He watched with them for a few minutes. "There's nothing like watching your own cattle graze on your own land." He winked. "Though Trace swears watching Beth brush her hair before bed comes close."

"It'll be a long time before we see anything like that." Sin snorted a laugh. "Good thing we've got cattle to keep us busy."

"I can see why Luke Frost isn't happy Trace and the MacDougals took both women who arrived on the Bride Train," said Henry. "There's mighty few females out here."

"Wait until Luke finds out Ben's bringing a wife home with him," said Ranger. His smile showed how much he anticipated Luke's reaction to the news.

"I hadn't heard Ben was married," said Ace.

Ranger shrugged. "Don't expect he is just yet, but my twin said he'd bring a wife. He hasn't broken a promise yet. Good thing, since he's been out East for years, learning to be a lawyer." Ranger lifted an eyebrow and looked at Ace. "Why? You lookin' for a wife?"

"Perhaps in a few years," replied Ace. "We have a lot to accomplish before we consider bringing a lady to the Double Diamond. Wives require pampering, which takes too much time from learning ranch work. As for children, we have many years before we

need to think about passing this on to our heirs.”

“The cabin is fine for us, but women expect comfort,” said Sin. “Beth Elliott and Amelia MacDougal walked into fine homes when they married. We can do no less, and that will take years.”

“I’ve got five older sisters. The last thing I want is a nattering woman fussing around the place.” Henry chuckled. “But I hear Montana winters are long, cold, and dark. I wouldn’t mind a warm woman next to me come November.” He sighed. “If you hear of one eager to live on a ranch with some greenhorns, let me know.”

Ranger coughed. He looked away from the Double Diamond men. After a moment he cleared his throat and looked back.

“I hear you’re looking for ranch hands. Find any in town?”

“No, blast it,” replied Ace. He turned to Ranger. “You brought three good men from Texas. Would they consider hiring on until winter? We could spare some of Smythe’s gold.”

Ranger shook his head. Humor sparkled in his eyes. “No insult intended, but they’d never work for greenhorns. They want their own ranch. Walt Chamberlain talked to them about bringing up cattle for him next year. Turns out he wants to start a ranch on his land. So, it’s just the three of you?”

“We’ll manage,” replied Ace stiffly.

“Of course,” agreed Ranger. He scratched his chin. “You thought about hiring a boy? One came to me today, lookin’ for work. I knew him before he went East for a couple years. He was a damn good cowhand before he left. Knows the land and works hard. He’s broke, so he’s willing to work for bed and board to prove himself.”

Ace frowned. “I do not think a child—”

“We’ll take him,” said Sin. He glared back at Ace. “If Ranger says the boy can do the work, it’s better than what we have now. All it will cost us is food. Maybe we can learn something from him.”

Ace glowered for a moment before nodding. Ranger lifted his hat and waved to the herd below. A horse, one of the Elliott *remuda*, moved toward them. The small shape of the rider proved it was the

boy.

"I'll have a word with him first," said Ranger. He rode downhill to meet the boy.

* * * *

"Dammit, Ranger! I can outride, outshoot, out-rope, and outlast all three of those greenhorns before breakfast! Why do I have to prove myself to you?"

Jessamine Bonham Elliott, all sixty-one inches of furious cowgirl, spat the words at her younger brother. As he was thirteen inches taller and more than twice her weight, all of it muscle, he smirked at her. They faced each other on horseback, far enough away from the three men watching so they wouldn't be overheard.

"Jessie, you've been in Virginia for two years, learning to be a lady. Before I let you buy into the Bitterroot Ranch, you've got to prove you're worth it."

"I swear, Ranger, if this is one of your tricks..." Her face screwed up in a snarl that would have suited a mountain lion. "You'll force me to work for a bunch of arrogant lordlings?"

Ranger shrugged and looked away as if it didn't matter. "Your choice, Jessie. But if you want to buy into the last Elliott ranch, you'll beg Ace to hire you for three weeks."

Jessie leaned back and raised her chin. "I don't beg a man for anything."

"You will if you want to be a ranch partner in this valley."

"You rotten—"

She huffed for a moment when words failed her. She snarled and punched at him with her fist. He easily caught it.

"That's another thing. If you fly off the handle and do stupid things without thinking of the consequences, I won't have you." She pressed her lips into a pout. "I can take tantrums in a puny sister, but not in a business partner."

He leaned over and lowered his head until they were almost nose to nose.

“If Ace says you worked hard, kept your mouth shut and didn’t fly off the handle, you’ll be able to become part of a ranch. Isn’t that what you’ve wanted all your life?”

He sat up straight and looked down his nose at her. She crossed her arms over her bound chest. Her chin stuck out as she glared up at him. He returned the smug smile of a younger, now larger and more powerful, brother.

“If you can’t prove yourself to me, there’s a lot of single men who want a wife. Even with your hair chopped off, you’re bound to find one to put up with you.” He sniffed as if he didn’t think she could meet his challenge.

“I am never going to marry,” she said between clenched teeth. “I worked hard for my freedom.” She shook out her shoulders, straightened up, and sneered. “I pretended to be a perfect lady for two years to get my inheritance. I can manage three weeks teaching greenhorns.”

She straightened up and pulled her hat off. She vigorously scratched her head. Instead of waist-length hair, she now had a cap of brown curls. Not only did her head feel lighter, she couldn’t be grabbed by her braid as Finan used to do. Stalling, she smacked her hat against her canvass pants as if proving how far she was from the primping, vacuous girl she’d pretended to be in Charleston.

“You want me to prove myself?” She narrowed her eyes and met him head-on. “Fine. Three weeks.” She stabbed him with her dark brown eyes. “Then I’ll be a full partner, riding and working beside you.”

“As I said, there’s a couple of ranches around who could use a wife,” said Ranger. “Luke Frost’s Circle C is next to Trace, with the Flying X beyond. They’re Southern gentlemen, so I don’t think they’d suit your temper. But the J Bar C is just east of here. Three cousins, all fairly rough. They’re all eager for a wife. Or you could—”

“I will not lose my freedom, and my money, to a man!” She spat the words out, keeping her voice low but her fury at full blast.

“Then you better convince Mr. Kenrick Langford that you’re a fourteen-year-old boy eager to prove your worth.”

She didn’t like the hint of laughter in Ranger’s eyes. He was up to something, but like Ben, he kept his promises. Both of them were slippery with words, though. She thought back, but her temper fuzzed the details of what he’d promised.

Ranger tilted his head at her, one eyebrow up. He likely figured she wouldn’t have the sand to last three weeks with lordlings who thought themselves better just because of who their father was. But Ranger hadn’t seen what she’d put up with for two years. As a Bonham of Charleston, Virginia, her bloodlines were top quality. She’d learned how to work the social network based on family connections, though she detested it. Give her horse or cattle breeding and she was top notch. Snooty humans was a whole ’nother thing.

She settled herself and lifted an eyebrow in return. Working on a horse in the fresh air would be a cakewalk after Virginia.

“How much is the Double Diamond paying?”

“Food and a place in the barn.”

“What! I know more about ranching than—”

Ranger lifted a finger. Jessie caught the movement and shut her mouth.

“I want you to prove yourself, but there’s a reason I chose the Double D. They’re good men and will do their damndest, but they’re greenhorns. They could have waited for us to deliver their cattle, but they came down to meet us and help the last few days. They’re good on a horse, they’re smart, and learn fast. Most of all, they’re determined to win.”

“I heard they won the whole kit and caboodle in a poker game,” she sneered. “Maybe they’ll lose it all the same way.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. Ace says he won’t be gambling again. You in or not?”

“Why don’t they hire someone to ramrod the place?” she muttered, glowering.

“You don’t hire a man to do your own job,” he replied, though she already knew the answer. “I talked to Trace and Gillis about them. They help others but won’t take charity, which includes the ranching help they desperately need. But if a kid begs to work for them, free, they’ll take you on and learn from you.”

“Why should I help them?”

“Remember when we first arrived in Texas? We knew nothing about scorpions, sidewinders, and everything else that could kill us. If Señor Garcia hadn’t helped us out of the goodness of his heart—”

“From the way he looked at Louisa, I think it was lower than his heart,” said Jessie with a snort. “After all, he married her a couple months later.”

“Dammit, Jessie! Do you want this chance, or not?”

She slouched in the saddle, playing with her horse’s mane. After a lifetime of dreams, another three weeks wouldn’t change anything. “Don’t got much choice, do I?”

“Good. Ace is the ramrod. He’s the one in the middle, Henry’s on one side, and Sin is the big one on the black horse that I know you want to ride. Don’t try it, or Sin will thrash you to town and back.”

“Didn’t think my brothers would let me anywhere near a man named Sin. Aren’t you afraid of my virtue?”

She fluttered her eyebrows at him, looking up in adoration. It was one of the things she’d been forced to learn as part of the lessons on how to win a rich husband. Ranger responded with a look of disgust.

“You’re better with a knife than I am. And he’s called Sin because his middle name is St. John. For some reason the English pronounce it ‘Sinjin.’ I’m not worried he’ll go after your virtue. No one would dare touch a virgin with six brothers and three male cousins living in the same valley.”

His look of lofty arrogance made her want to prove him different. She didn’t care about losing her virginity because she didn’t want

anything to do with a husband. But Ranger was right. Once word got around that she was Jessamine Elliott, the only men who'd come near her were those wanting to marry. They'd want her for her wealth, not her ability or personality. Just like the ones in Virginia.

She looked up at the three big men watching them. They didn't look like the fops who drooled over her cleavage for the last two years.

"I haven't met a man who I wanted to dance with, much less kiss."

At least, she hadn't met any yet. But just because she didn't like dandies didn't mean she wasn't a red-blooded female with needs. She was curious to see what all the hoopla was about. The last few times she watched mares being mounted, her breasts tingled and she felt a warm, wet sensation between her thighs. Looking at Sin made her feel a bit the same. Any man with such a magnificent horse couldn't be all bad.

If only her Nightwind wasn't in Texas. Her mare and that stallion would make damn good babies. The thought of watching the two huge black horses mate made her twitch in the saddle. Nightwind, so much bigger than the greenbroke horses on the Texas ranch, refused every stallion that came near her. She and Nightwind had a lot in common, though Jessie was so much smaller than most men. Nightwind had teeth and hooves, but Jessie had her knives and knew how to fight dirty.

"Make sure they don't find out who you are." Ranger settled his shoulders. "Working with them will give you a chance to harden up before I put you to work."

She caught another flash of a laugh and narrowed her eyes at him. "I swear, if this is one of your schemes, I'll—"

"Who knows, you might end up enjoying it so much you'll want to stay on." He turned his horse and cantered toward the herd, a laugh trailing behind him.

Though he couldn't see it, Jessie gave her brother one last glare.

The only girl of seven, sandwiched between two sets of twins, she knew too much about men. They had a sense of power most women never learned to enjoy. From the moment she realized that power existed, she did everything to get it.

Other than those two simpering years with their mother's wealthy old-maid sister, she'd gone her own way. Of course, she followed the orders of the ranch boss, but all along she planned to be in partnership with her younger brothers. She had three weeks to find out if the Double Diamond men were up to her standards. If they were, she might try some of that kissing and see where it led. They wouldn't know who she was, so she could be herself, warts and all.

If she had to take orders from greenhorns, at least she could do it with the know-it-all attitude of a fourteen-year-old boy. She certainly knew what that was all about, having spent her life with them.

She tucked in her chin and walked her horse uphill toward the trio of men. She ignored them, eying Sin's tall, all-black stallion with envy. He must be eighteen hands high. She wasn't sure of the breed, but he had feathers on all four legs and a thick mane and tail. Yes, Nightwind might find this stallion worth coupling with.

After she looked at the horses, she checked out the men riding them. Ace sat tall in the saddle, as if he was the lord of the manor. He might find it easy to win a ranch playing cards, but keeping it would be far more work. Had he ever done a day's work, or gotten his hands dirty? She'd enjoy pulling his attitude down a few pegs. If it bothered him that a boy could outwork him, wait until three weeks from now, when he found out he'd been bested by a woman!

Something stirred in her belly when she got close. Yes, these were men, not overbred fops. While Henry looked happy to see her, Sin frowned and Ace continued to look down his nose. Ranger said she had to keep her temper. He didn't say anything about pushing her new bosses to lose theirs. Ace looked like the type to take a horsewhip to the serfs on his family estate if they looked at him sideways. Her youngest brother, Patrick, said the man spoke like the King's

professor, with big words and perfect diction. Therefore, she would do the opposite.

“I heered yer lookin’ fer a man. I’s small, but I kin work jist as hard.”

Chapter Two

Ace slowly peeled off his gloves as he stared at the dirty-faced urchin. The boy looked about fourteen. He scowled at the world from under a battered felt hat. His clothes had also seen better days. The boy was scrawny and determined, with a chip on his shoulder big enough to carry a horse. If he'd ever been near a grammar book, it hadn't caught his eye—or his tongue.

“Why are you not living with your parents?”

“Cain't. They'se dead.”

The boy hawked and spat. The gob missed Ace's boot by a few inches, close enough to be insulting but not quite enough to get him shot for insolence. The boy's boots and belt were good quality, though worn, as was the gun he wore low on his right hip. He tilted his face enough to flick a quick glance. Ace saw the sneer, quickly hidden. He returned the boy's look. A desperate man had to use what was available.

“I heered yer hard up fer a hand to cut yer cattle.” He spoke to his saddle horn. “I been out East fer a bit but I lived here afore Ma and Da died. I knows how to work good.”

Ace noticed the kid's suddenly clenched jaw. He'd done the same at that age to stop his feelings from showing. Eyes, so dark a brown they were almost black, suddenly met his. The kid was a pinch over five feet, perhaps a hundred pounds if he wore the duster and was soaking wet. Something about his narrow face looked familiar, but the boy looked away so fast Ace couldn't tell what.

“I know the land, mister. We both need som'fin the other's got.” The brat stuck a thumb in his belt and leaned back in the saddle as if

he was the one with the power.

Unfortunately, the boy was right. They needed to separate their cattle from the Elliotts and settle them in their new home. Calves needed branding and castrating. Ranger said the boy would work for bed and board. Since it was summer, “bed” would be the barn or a blanket under the stars and “board” would be whatever they could rustle up. Most days, it would be beans and salt pork with a can of peaches for dessert. If one of them caught a deer, Henry’s venison stew was the best grub around.

Sin moved his horse around to flank the boy. He checked him out then nodded. “Try him out for a couple weeks. If we don’t like what we see, no fair, no foul.”

The boy startled at Sin’s deep voice. He straightened his spine, adding another quarter inch to his five-feet-damn-all and nodded regally. He certainly had attitude to spare. He’d better have a strong back to go with it.

Ace watched the boy check out Sin and Henry. A faint flush rose from the boy’s collar, and he looked down after he caught Sin’s eye. Ace frowned. When he was that age, didn’t he have a touch of fuzz on his cheeks and a faint bulge of Adam’s apple? The boy had soft cheeks and his long neck was smooth. Just like a girl.

A shiver flowed through Ace. His cock twitched, eager for action. Ace winced and hauled his eyes off the boy. Blast, he needed a woman! He’d never been attracted to a boy before. He didn’t want the reaction his body demanded. He didn’t want the brat anywhere near him. Unfortunately, they needed his skills. Even more, Sin wanted him. Sin was best at reading people, and Ace trusted his judgment. He’d let Ace and Henry work with the boy while he stayed away. Far, far away. He cleared his throat.

“What is your name, boy?”

“Jessie.”

“How old are you?”

“It don’t matter none.”

Sin poked Jessie hard in the side with his finger. The kid winced and then turned his head, clenching his fists. Though Sin smirked, the boy held his temper. Ace noted the boy wasn't intimidated by Sin's size. Though a foot-and-a-half shorter, Jessie gave no quarter. Perhaps he was used to men towering over him and expected they wouldn't hit a kid. That attitude was necessary when working with cattle weighing up to a couple thousand pounds. The three adults would make sure the kid didn't display it at them, however.

"Ranger Elliott told ye I kin do the job. Do ye trust him or not?"

"We'll take you on trial for three weeks. Follow orders, keep your mouth shut, and we'll get along." Ace nodded at his partners and rode toward the herd.

* * * *

Jessie let her shoulders relax. She'd achieved the last step toward reaching her dream. The second day on the Bride Train she'd switched her bright yellow dress with another woman. She cut her hair and changed into the clothes she'd hidden like a dirty secret for two years. With comfortable clothes and short hair came the freedom to think and speak her mind, to go where she wanted, and to live—or die—with the consequences.

Even though she wasn't six feet tall with bulging muscles, it didn't mean she couldn't run a ranch. She expected to have to prove it to Ranger and Patrick. But she hadn't counted on having to wear bindings around her chest, a wide padded belt to hide her curves or a long coat to cover her round bottom. In August heat, no less.

If Ace and his partners found out she was female before the three weeks were up, they'd ruin her deal with Ranger. With so few women around, her brothers would try to dump an idiot of a husband on her. He'd confine her to a cabin, and tell her to make dinner and babies. She'd lose control over her inheritance, her life, and her body.

That was not happening to Jessie Elliott. She'd be partner in a

ranch come hell or high water! To do that, she had to hide herself, and her personality, for twenty-one days.

"I say, Statham," drawled Henry in an upper-crust accent. She'd heard a few of those in Charleston. None of them could even dress themselves, much less rope a cow. "Langford is a mite put out by the lad, hmm?" He caught Jessie with his laughing blue eyes and winked. He dropped the plummy accent. "In case you don't know, I'm Henry Bennett, and the blond giant beside me is Charles Statham, Sin to his friends. If you can, stay out of Ace's way for the next three weeks."

"Yessir."

"You hungry?"

Jessie shrugged. When she walked past Baldy's Saloon around dinnertime on her way to see Ranger, the stench wafting out made her almost lose yesterday's supper, the only meal she'd had recently. She startled when Charles put his hand on her shoulder.

The gentlemen in Virginia would never dare touch a woman with bare hands, and then only to dance. He wasn't one of those dandies, and he wasn't her brother. No one else had touched her for a long, long time. His warmth seeped into her, stirring a heat she wasn't sure she understood, but enjoyed. The part between her legs tingled like it did when she touched herself there. She clenched her muscles, shifting in the saddle.

"Time to find some stew and biscuits. We'll spend tonight with the herd, but if we can cut out all the steers for market tomorrow, we should be able to sleep at home. Welcome to the Double Diamond, Jessie."

He squeezed her shoulder and released her. She nodded, biting her lip, and followed them downhill to the herd. Ranger nodded for them to eat, so they put their horses with the *remuda*. Sin and Henry's legs were so long, Jessie had to trot to keep up as they walked toward the campfire. Sin was like a blond mountain. He was at least as big as The MacDougal in Texas. He seemed far kinder, though, and saw too much. She was sure he noticed her flush when Henry commented she

looked skinny enough to be a girl as they took care of their horses. When she replied that she could make him into one with her knife real easy, Sin laughed. It sounded warm and welcoming. Did she feel this way because it was so long since she'd been accepted?

She got her plate filled with stew and inhaled the wonderful smell of home. She sat on a log, bracketed by Sin and Henry. She might look like a young boy, but the scent of these clean, hard-working men sent quivers between her thighs.

Except for the day of his daughter Louisa's marriage, The MacDougal never let Jessie off the Texas ranch. She'd spent her life surrounded by men. Louisa was older and a spoiled princess. Sunbird, the Indian wife of The MacDougal, was a quiet shadow who spent her days working in and around the homestead. Until she left for Virginia, Jessie hadn't spoken to anyone else in years. The men she'd seen since weren't worth spit, and most of the women were worse.

Never had one of those overconfident men from the First Families of Virginia made her want to lean against them and inhale their strength. Likely because they didn't have any. But she kept herself rigidly upright, eyes on her food. It was just a first impression, but she might ask Sin after her three weeks were up if he was interested in teaching her the ropes of bedsport. Henry might help, as well. Ace could go to hell. She wouldn't have anything to do with the arrogant, insufferable lordling.

She took her first bite, mostly gravy to ease her stomach into the idea of food. She closed her eyes and moaned as it flowed over her taste buds. Sin shifted away from her as if disgusted with her manners.

"Who's Ranger Elliott to you?" he asked.

He nudged her with his elbow when she didn't answer. His touch made her jump. Caught swallowing, she coughed and wiped her mouth.

"After Ma and Pa died I lived with the MacDougals. The Rocking E is across the valley. I saw the Elliots a lot."

She ignored him and concentrated on the wonderful food for a while. Since she'd finished all her biscuits, she used her finger to wipe up the last of the gravy. The men did the same, so they couldn't complain.

"First thing in the morning we split out the market steers," said Henry. "Then we'll separate the herds. Have you done that before?"

"Not much different than roundup," she said. "You worried I'll let them Elliotts take the best beef?"

"You don't worry me at all, Jessie Bonham," said Sin in a smooth, deep rumble.

He leaned close when he took her empty plate. His warm breath brushed her bare neck, raising a flash of heat that had nothing to do with the campfire. She pressed her knees together, startled at the throbbing need that erupted. She hugged her coat around her and watched Sin's backside as he took the plates to the cook.

"I'll be damned," said Henry, staring after him. "Something's got under his skin about you as well." He shrugged. "You'd better stay clear of Sin as well as Ace."

"I'm planning to."

Chapter Three

Jessie had her bedroll and morning ablutions taken care of and a fire going long before the snores of the three men sleeping nearby changed into morning grumbles. They took shifts all night with the cattle, taking turns with the Elliotts. She was glad to get a quick visit with Patrick. Her youngest brother was now twenty-one and relieved to be out from under Finan MacDougal's harsh hand. He swore to keep her identity a secret.

It was Bonham money that Ben used to buy and stock the Bitterroot Ranch.

Their mother, Louisa Bonham, eloped with Benjamin Elliott, a man far beneath her, and travelled west. Of course, she was immediately disinherited. Though her maiden sister was the last of a distinguished family, Jessamine Bonham had standards. Bonham money would go to the Elliotts only if they proved they were ladies and gentlemen.

To get her inheritance, Jessie had to complete two years at the Virginia Female Institute, behaving like a perfect lady the entire time. When Ben visited her and charmed Miss Jessamine Bonham, their mother's maiden sister, she'd deemed him acceptable enough to receive a Bonham inheritance. As he was a lawyer, she gave him Ranger and Patrick's share, which he used to buy the Bitterroot Ranch. Once Jessie finished these three weeks, she'd use her portion to buy a quarter of it. She'd work the ranch with Ben, Ranger, and Patrick for the rest of her life.

Her brothers protected her from Fin and Hugh, the oldest and nastiest of the MacDougal brothers, all her life. They accepted her as

one of them, a cowboy. Ever since she left Texas, she imagined how the four of them would live together, working and profiting from their labors. It was wonderful to have Trace and his wife, Beth, along with the twins Simon and Jack, next door. With cousins Gillis, Ross, and Nevin MacDougal across the river, life would be near perfect. But none of them would know she was home until her three weeks were up. Ranger would make sure of that.

She checked the coffee. It was near boiling, and the iron fry pan on the coals was hot. The salt pork sizzled when she dropped it in the pan.

“That you making breakfast, Jessie?”

“Coffee’s ready,” she said in reply. She figured the voice belonged to Henry but wasn’t going to guess. It certainly wasn’t Sin’s low rumble. If they had to spend another night around the campfire, she’d sleep farther from him. Maybe that would stop her from dreaming about his hands on her skin.

Sin walked a fair way from camp before taking a leak, though Ace and Henry didn’t bother going too far. Heat crept up her cheeks when they unbuttoned and pulled out their cocks. She kept her face near the fire, using it as an excuse in case they noticed a red tinge. Growing up surrounded by men, she was used to that sort of thing, but it was different when she was related to them. For some reason, she wanted to see what these men had in their pants. Maybe English cocks were different from Western men’s. Curiosity, that was all it was.

Sin came over and nudged her shoulder with his knee. “Coffee,” he growled in a morning voice.

She glanced up then quickly put her eyes on her task when he yawned and scratched his naked chest. His blond curls let her see his nipples. Her heart thudded, hard. Maybe it was because the men in Virginia were always dressed from toes to neck. She wasn’t used to casual nakedness. The interest should fade in a day or two.

She wrapped a cloth around her hand and poured coffee into a tin mug. Since he didn’t move, she had to reach back to hand it to him.

His eyes, half-closed as if not yet awake, flicked over her. A rush of heat hit, just like the previous night. He took the cup, nodded his thanks, and moved away. She fixed the same for Ace and Henry. By the time they finished their coffee, the salt pork was sizzling and beans bubbling.

"I could get used to this," said Henry. "What else can you cook?"

"This isn't cooking," she scoffed, keeping her voice as deep as she could.

"Answer my partner's question," demanded Ace.

"Biscuits and gravy, stew, potpie." She shrugged. "Anything on a campfire."

"We'd better keep him," said Henry to Ace. "I don't mind cooking dinner and supper, but waking up to hot coffee and breakfast is a treat."

"Ranger says the boy knows the land though it's been a couple of years since he roped any cattle," said Ace to his partners. "That true?" He speared her accusingly with his eyes.

"Yessir. Ain't no longhorns in Virginee."

Ace's eyes were as cold as a Charleston matriarch when faced with the thought of their son marrying an upstart such as herself. Aunt Jessamine had the same look when she dirtied her dress in the garden. Maybe rich people were born knowing how to freeze servants with one look. She preferred to befriend them.

"I do not appreciate insolence. That attitude will bring punishment."

"Yessir."

Jessie gritted her teeth so she wouldn't tell the arrogant Brit to go to the devil. Finan MacDougal, the man who'd ruled her life for the last ten years, knew where to hit so it hurt like hell, but though your arms and legs ached, you could still work hard. A couple times he took a switch to her bottom then ordered her into the saddle. Only once did he take the whip to her. Just thinking about it made her tense up. If Ace raised a hand to her, she would fight back, and to hell with

Ranger's plans.

"You've got three weeks to prove you can work. And that means taking orders without comment. All I want to hear from you, other than succinct answers to questions, is 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir.' Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" She said the words with a straight face while mentally saluting the pompous lordling. She wouldn't be surprised if he stuck his hand in his coat between the buttons, just like the pictures she'd seen of Napoleon.

"Breakfast was a good start, but you'd better know how to work."

She wanted to say, 'I know a hell of a lot more than you, greenhorn,' or 'let's just see how sore your butt is when the sun goes down, buster.' Instead she packed up the things she'd used, leaving the pan upside down on the banked fire beside the coffeepot.

"Which is my horse?"

"You get what's left," said Ace.

She'd checked the Double D's remuda out after she returned Ranger's horse the night before. She figured Sin would have the tall bay gelding with the intelligent eyes, Ace the high-stepper eager to run and Henry the calm mare. She'd end up with the off-white, hip-shot piece of crowbait who didn't look like it would wake up for its own funeral.

Twelve hours later Jessie stood on wobbly legs in the Double Diamond barn. They'd cut out the steers and moved them to the far east end. They'd fatten up until the weather started getting bad then they'd go to Bannack City for slaughter. The rest of the herd would be divided between the Bitterroot and the Double Diamond starting in the morning.

She lifted aching arms and hauled her saddle off. She rested it on her left hip, staggering a bit under the weight, then heaved it on the pole to dry. The horse she'd named "Trouble" turned out to be a good cutting horse, once she proved who was boss. It reached behind and pulled the blanket off its back with its teeth, dropping it on the straw-

dusted floor.

“Dang it, Trouble, you’re just like Ranger. Have to get the last word.”

The horse nodded as if pleased with himself. Jessie slowly bent her sore back and picked the blanket up. She brushed off all the bits which might scratch his hide when she put it back on in the morning. She flipped it upside down on top of the saddle, then cleaned and hung up her tack.

Finally, she held the brush with cramped fingers and stroked Trouble from his ears on back. He watched her from the corners of his eyes, eager to grab her hat again. She saw him move and brought up her arm to block him. He nipped her above the elbow. She smacked his shoulder with her hat, more for show than anything.

“I told you I was the boss, so smarten up!”

He lifted his tail and deposited his answer.

Grumbling, she moved him forward so he wouldn’t step in it and finished brushing him. It had been a while since he’d been cared for. When she was done, the floor was speckled with white hair. She turned him into the corral, raked up the hair, and went for the pitchfork. Since she had it in hand anyway, she took the wheelbarrow through the barn and picked up the rest of the horse droppings. She corrected the tack that wasn’t hung properly and did her usual tidy inspection. Finan MacDougal did not tolerate waste, sloth or untidiness. Except in his precious youngest boy, Malcolm, of course. She put all the tools away and rolled out her shoulders.

“Got a cramp?”

She whirled around. Sin stood there, arms crossed and one eyebrow high. Blond hairs dusted his muscular forearms where he’d turned up his sleeves. She licked her lips and turned away.

“Nope.” It came out too high. She swallowed and breathed, forcing the tightness out of her voice.

“Liar. Come here and I’ll fix it. You haven’t ridden like that in years and your muscles will be stiff.”

“Nope.”

“That wasn’t a request. I can’t have you too sore to move tomorrow morning.”

The thought of his hands on her body made her shiver. Why couldn’t she have signed on with ugly weasels with whiney voices instead of deep ones which made her chest vibrate?

“Now, Jessie.”

She could do this. He would touch her shoulders, and that was all. It would help her sleep so she could work in the morning. She’d much rather soak in the secret hot spring, but that couldn’t happen for another three weeks. She gave him her back. He rested his huge, warm hands on either side of her neck for a moment.

Oh, damn, it felt good.

He placed his right hand just under her collarbone and worked her back with his knuckles. If she wasn’t wearing her bindings, and if his fingers trailed to one side or the other, he’d touch her breasts with those large, hot hands. She startled and winced when he hit a knot at the edge of her shoulder blade.

“Relax, Jessie. I’ve got you.”

She relaxed her muscles as much as possible with her heart beating like all get-out. For such a huge man, his touch was gentle. He dug his thumbs into a knot of muscle, and she winced. He went back to soothing, and she relaxed. If he dropped his head a bit, his teeth would be perfectly placed to nibble her neck. Would he nibble her there if he knew she wasn’t a boy?

“You did a good job today, Jessie. Even Ace gave a short nod of approval.”

She rolled her lips over her teeth and nodded her thanks. He switched hands, but this time his left palm rested on the top of her bound breast. Her nipple fought to rise. There was no way it could get past the layers of wrapping, but thank God, at least she finally knew it worked when she wasn’t cold.

Over the years she’d heard the older boys talking about how to tell

if a woman wanted them to touch her, and hard nipples were high on their list. Never had she felt anything for a man. She could make her fingers do things between her legs to make her feel good but could never imagine wanting a man to touch her there. His touch changed her mind. Unfortunately, now that she found a man whose touch she liked, she couldn't let him find out her secret. Not yet.

"Better now?" She nodded, unable to speak. "Henry should have supper ready. Wash up here, and I'll see you at the house."

He left quickly and quietly. Someone had set a full ewer and bowl in the barn's corner stall where she'd be sleeping. She scrubbed from fingers to elbows, forehead to chest. Had Sin done this for her? Why would he care if she washed up here, rather than outside the kitchen with the others? Maybe he suspected she was shy and didn't want the new boy to feel overwhelmed. She bit her lip. If he knew about her sex, he'd say something.

Wouldn't he?

Chapter Four

Sin looked out the window at the virginal miss strutting from the barn. Right from the start he'd wondered what was off with Jessie. Her stubborn chin, pointed like an elf, and the lack of peach fuzz suggested something other than a boy.

When she put the first spoonful of stew in her mouth and moaned, his cock had hardened like she was about to take him there. That morning, when she looked up to hand him his coffee, confirmed it. The graceful line of her throat and the swell of her ass, previously hidden by her coat, proved it.

She was so damn efficient, roping ten steers for every one of theirs, that by the end of the day he wondered if he was wrong. When she bent over to pick up the blanket, her pants tightened and he'd almost choked. No boy had a heart-shaped ass like that. He had to touch her, telling himself it was to make sure. Working out the knots in her shoulders was sweet torture. Then he'd let his fingers drop lower on her chest and felt ridges where her shirt should cover only skin. Ridges from binding her breasts.

How big were they? Were the tips rosy, or coral pink? Large or small nipples?

Shit! He was never going to get supper if he couldn't get his cock under control. He hadn't had a hard-on this big since he was fifteen. He snorted and thought back. Ace and Henry were visiting. One of his mother's merry widows invited all three of them into her bed. The woman spent the next week showing them what every young buck should know. She was demanding, insisting she come first, second and third. That was bloody difficult to do at fifteen. Considering how

long he'd gone without a woman, it would be no easier now.

Jessie entered the cabin, and Sin turned away from the window. He was twenty-seven years old, and a slim girl dressed as a boy made him want to plunge his cock in her mouth, her pussy, and her ass, one after another.

He knew why Ace was so out of sorts. The man was so focused on getting the job done that he only saw what he expected. Ranger said Jessie was a boy. Therefore, if Ace felt attracted to Jessie, it meant something was wrong. Ace would withdraw, using cutting language to hide his discomfort.

They'd planned to get a mail-order bride in a couple of years after the ranch was well on the way. But Sin wanted the little miss who quivered when he touched her. She was eighteen inches shorter and at least a third of his weight, but she was tough. Her work today proved it. She was so small and delicate that he wanted to take care of her. At the same time, he wanted to plow into her again and again.

Could she take all three of them?

Neither he nor Henry needed to produce heirs. They wouldn't care what name their children had, as long as they all belonged to the Double Diamond. Ace, however, needed the roots a legal wife provided. He needed to have sons with his name to prove his descendents were not wastrels like the rest of his family. Ace was also the son of an Earl, and their natural leader. He would be the one saying "I do."

If Sin wanted Jessie in his life, he'd have to get Ace comfortable with Jessie-the-boy for a while and appreciate "his" abilities on the ranch. The antagonism between Ace and Jessie, given the right encouragement, could turn into passion. He'd enjoy watching the two of them throw sparks at each other. Sin intended to fan the flames. He wanted Jessie in his bed, one way or the other.

The Elliotts shared Trace's wife, Beth, and the MacDougals shared Ross's wife, Amelia. Why shouldn't the Double Diamond do the same? Henry might figure out Jessie's secret, but he'd keep quiet.

But who was Jessie Bonham? She must be connected to the Elliotts, since Ranger brought her to them. From only one day, he knew Jessie wanted to be respected for her ranching. If he'd seen her in a skirt first, would he believe her abilities on a horse? Did Ranger want Jessie to find a husband who respected her as who she was?

Sin suddenly choked. Dammit, Ranger set them up! The one time she took her hat off he saw her hair was brown, like Ranger. Her chin looked as stubborn as well. Jack once mentioned a sister who was more cowboy than girl. Her name—was Jessamine!

Thank you, God.

Sin snorted a laugh. Ace wanted deep roots and a family. The Elliotts were the perfect choice. They arrived before Tanner's Ford became a town and had two ranches up the valley. Their so-called cousins, Gillis MacDougal and his half brothers, had The MD Connected, bordering the Double Diamond on the west.

Sin cracked his fingers and then rubbed his hands. His face damn near split from the wide smile on it. By the time snow fell, Ace would be married to Jessie. Somehow, it had to happen. He and Henry could show her who the best man really was!

Though the courtship was extremely unusual, and invisible to the bride- and groom-to-be, Sin had to keep things proper. They were raised to be honorable gentlemen and always conducted themselves accordingly.

Ranger must have told Trace about Jessie, and that she was safe at the Double Diamond. Since her father was dead, he would speak to Jessie's oldest brother. Trace was very protective of women. He'd not let his younger sister live with three male strangers, no matter how innocent it seemed. But if he knew Ace would marry Jessie, and Sin would keep her safe until then, Trace might let her stay until Ace came to his senses.

After all, Jessie was a very demanding woman and not anyone could keep her in line. There were three other ranches in this valley, each with three partners looking for a wife. Ranger had a reason to

choose the Double Diamond for his only sister. Sin would make sure it happened, and do his damndest to keep Jessie a virgin until her wedding day.

He hoped spending twelve or more hours a day in the saddle would lower his libido.

Chapter Five

Virginia

“What do ye mean Jessie’s gone? She was to come home to Texas with me!”

“I said sit down, young man!”

Finan MacDougal, Junior, ground his teeth for a moment. He looked at the white-haired, white-gloved old biddy with the face and attitude of a spoiled lapdog. Miss Bonham, sister and only surviving relative of Jessie’s ma, would know where he’d find his fiancée. Pa sent him to bring the Elliott brat—and her inheritance—home to Texas, and by damn, he would do it!

He’d learned a few things since leaving Texas. The first was that his fists couldn’t always get him what he wanted. The second, that it was not a good idea for a stranger to show anger by using those fists. The two-bit sheriff of that one-horse town kept him in jail for a week. Most of his gold went to fixing the saloon’s furniture and window. He did a lot of thinking while cooling his heels in jail.

Once he married Jessie, Pa would treat him like a man. No more ordering him around like he was one of the hired hands. With Jessie’s money in his hand, he could change a few things around the Bar MD. First, he’d change her attitude. She’d soon learn to treat him with respect. If necessary he’d chain her ankle to the stove for a while to stop her running.

But first he had to find her and haul her back to Texas. Pa was already planning the wedding to ensure the right people could make it. Fin carefully set his bulk on the parlor chair again and smiled

through his newly trimmed moustache.

“Milk or lemon?”

“Dinna suppose ye have any whiskey?”

Miss Bonham raised an eyebrow and dared him to make trouble.

“Lemon,” he growled, though he didn’t give a damn. She waited, her mouth pursed like the back end of a plucked chicken. He sighed. “Please.”

She took about an hour to pour the damn tea, stir in lemon juice, add a dry biscuit to the saucer and pass it over. He took it carefully, his huge hands making the delicate cup seem like his sister Louisa’s toys. He forced himself to drink the stuff. After downing gallons of cheap whiskey all the way from Texas to Virginia, he could stomach one cup of weak tea.

“My niece took the Bride Train to Montana Territory. She left a fortnight ago.”

“What—” He set the teacup on a scalloped-edge table with a rattle. “What’d she do that fer?” The old bat sniffed. He held back a snort. Jessie shared the uppity attitude of the old biddy, as well as a name.

“Jessamine has been taught marriage is a holy sacrament, one every woman strives to obtain.” She placed her hand over her bosom. “My dear Edward was taken from me before we could wed. I did not have the heart to find another.”

Finan waited while she dabbed her eyes. He figured she’d found a patsy and, when he died, didn’t want to marry someone who would be a real husband.

“I did my best to find her a good Virginia boy. Unfortunately, she didn’t suit.”

She looked down and stirred her tea. Two round spots of hot pink appeared in her cheeks. Fin choked back another snort. He couldn’t see Jessie with one of those pasty-faced weak Eastern dudes. She needed a strong hand, one he was ready to apply.

“Miss Elliott insisted her brothers would find her a good

husband.” She flicked her eyes over him, from trimmed hair to polished boots. She curled her lip. “Men of the West need the calming effect of a genteel woman’s hand.”

Dammit, how dare she look down her bony nose at him! He bought new clothes for this visit, including a neck cloth that damn near choked him to death. The tight clothes made it hard to breath, to move, and to think.

“She were supposed te marry *me*!”

This time she hit him with the lip curl and sniff at the same time. Her eyes glittered like the jet beads around her scrawny neck.

“My niece has proven she is a lady. I find it difficult to believe she would discuss marriage with you.”

Fin bit his tongue so he wouldn’t roar at her. He had a hard enough time being in the same room with this woman, much less listening to her drivel. Real men didn’t “discuss” things with women. They told them the way it was to be. If they didn’t like it, a beating or two would cure them.

Pa never had to beat Sunbird because she behaved properly. He figured he’d have a few go-rounds with Jessie, but she’d learn. By damn, he wasn’t going home alone. He needed an heir for the Clan. But first, he had to find the damn brat. He curled his hands into fists, remembering those days in jail. After that, he could put up with one old woman. He attempted another smile, though it made his teeth ache.

“Afore her pa died, he begged mine to care for the lass. ’Tis a deathbed promise.”

“That may be, young man, but Jessamine is already on her way West. If you wish to speak with her, you’ll have to do the same.”

He nodded. Considering the sparks Jessie threw out, it wouldn’t be hard to track her. In fact, chasing her down would give him a reason to have more fun. Pa told him to draw what he needed out of the bank. He’d have a good time on the train. The antique chair creaked as he settled back.

“Would ye be knowing what color dress she wore when she left?”

Miss Bonham pursed her mouth. “Yellow. Not suitable for travelling, but the girl is headstrong.” She shuddered delicately.

“Why did ye let her to wear it, then?” He wasn’t going to miss the chance to poke the old witch. She looked down her nose at him because he was a Highland Scot, and came from Texas. Double-damned in her mind. Double-gold in his.

The teacup rattled against the saucer as Miss Bonham put it back on the table. “I was mistaken as to the time the Bride Train departed. I barely arrived in time to see her off.”

“Did she bring a trunk?” That would slow her down.

“A trunk?” She raised that damn eyebrow again. “A lady requires many dresses if she wishes to entertain properly. My niece would have at least three trunks.”

He nodded, thinking it would be easy to find a loud, opinionated scrap of a woman in a bright yellow dress hauling a bunch of trunks.

“I’d best be after her, then. Thank ye for the help.” He stood up and, now that he had what he wanted, bowed his thanks. “I’ll let meself out.”

“I wish to receive an announcement of my niece’s wedding, Mr. MacDougal. No matter whom she chooses.”

He looked around the room. Expensive furniture covered in doodads with wallpaper behind. The house was in a rich area, one that hadn’t been destroyed when the army came through. Maybe Jessie would inherit this estate as well.

“I’ll make sure ye get one, Miss Bonham. Good day.”

By the time his foot hit the front step, he’d ripped off his neck cloth and undone a few buttons. He stood on the street for a minute, thinking. He’d change back into real clothes, take the next train, and track Jessie down. He would not take “no” for an answer. After he had his way with her, no man would want her. She’d belong to him, along with everything she owned.

Pa would smile when he dragged the little miss home. Sunbird

would be happy as well. She was getting old and could use some help with the house chores. Although there was only him, Malcolm, and Pa at home, the ranch hands also expected a good supper each night. Sunbird's cooking was one reason they could keep hands even though Pa worked them hard. Jessie would learn to cook as well as to serve his other needs.

Chapter Six

“We’ll rope and bring the calves to you,” said Ranger on the second morning. The Double Diamond men faced Ranger and Patrick Elliott. The three men they’d brought from Texas waited at the side. A pack of eager dogs sat at their feet. “Since you’ve got muscle, you’ll hold the calves and do the branding. Jessie’ll cut the bulls and handle the branding irons.”

Ace nodded his agreement. He intended to brand their first calf, followed by Sin and Henry.

“One RB for the Bitterroot Ranch, and one Double Diamond,” continued Ranger. “We’ll rope ’em and bring ’em over. When their mommas join them, push the Double D up the hill to the east and the others to the west. Any questions?”

Even though Ace had dozens, he didn’t say a thing. If he didn’t learn all the answers in the next few weeks, he might consider dropping by the Bitterroot Ranch with a bottle and some questions. Earlier, Jessie had put three branding irons with a backwards R attached to B on one side of the fire and their three, with a set of diamonds, center points touching, on the other.

None of the grown cattle would be branded, though they all wore the Bar MD brand. Some brands were upside down, to distinguish the Elliott from the Texas MacDougal cattle, as Ranger and Patrick had taken their wages in cattle for the last few years. The existing brands didn’t matter now that the Double D had paid them in gold for their share. With the Rocking E and MD Connected ranches between the Bitterroot and Double Diamond, strays shouldn’t be a problem.

No one wanted to wrestle a beast with horns six-feet wide from tip

to tip.

Everyone but the Double D mounted up. Ace watched Ranger and Patrick catch the first calf, Ranger around the forelegs and Patrick the back. As instructed, Sin wrestled it to the ground and lay over its shoulders while Henry took the hind end. Jessie handed Ace the branding iron, and he set it on the hide. The stink of burning hair was like the smell of gold. A moment more and they let it go. It ran back to momma and was driven up to the east to start their herd.

He did the next as well, using the Bitterroot iron. It had a backward-facing *R* attached to a *B*. The brand was designed by Rowena and Bertram Jones, and would do for Ranger and Benjamin Elliott. Patrick said he didn't mind as a *P* was hidden in both letters.

"This one's a bull," warned Patrick.

Henry took the bull's head while Ace took the rear. Jessie pulled a small knife out of his front pocket.

"We cut them first, then brand," said Jessie. "Make damn sure you got a good hold."

Ace didn't like the eager way Jessie approached the bull. He held the knife in his teeth and knelt. The calf didn't seem to notice the half-inch slice, though Ace winced. Jessie's small fingers pulled out an oval testicle. He pushed back on the string that held it to the bull, at the same time stretching it from the belly. It came loose. The second one went as easily.

Jessie stood and Sin applied the brand. A moment later the new steer ran away as if nothing had happened.

"You're good at that," said Sin to Jessie.

Jessie tossed the testicles to the dogs. Two snapped them out of the air and raced away. "You just keep that in mind, Mr. Statham." Ace didn't miss the warning, though Sin smiled and touched his hat for some reason.

Ace didn't remember much more of the day. They didn't break for dinner, wanting to finish as soon as possible. Now and then they gulped water to cut the dust then went back to work. Hour after hour

of dropping on struggling calves, carefully pressing the branding iron down and watching a grinning Jessie un-man the bulls, took a lot out of a man.

Ace looked up at the clang of metal. It was his turn to brand, but no one handed the metal rod to him. He turned in a circle, realizing he wasn't choking on dust raised by hundreds of hooves. Though his head pounded, no bellows from angry mommas grated against his ears.

He must look as stunned as Sin and Henry. Jessie lay on the ground, spread-eagled as if shot. If the adults were so tired, the boy must be exhausted with the long day's work. Ace thought about helping Jessie to stand but didn't have the energy. Ranger leaned down and offered a hand, pulling the boy upright. Jessie staggered for a minute, leaning on Ranger, who put his arm around him.

Ace narrowed his eyes. How dare Ranger touch his—He shook his head and turned away. His what? Hired boy? Why should he care what happened to the brat? Though he could hardly think, his cock tried to rise.

Damn, he needed to get laid. When they sold the steers in Bannack City, he and his partners would spend a bit of their hard-earned gold on good whiskey and bad women. Miss Lily could tell him the place least likely to pass on disease. Until then, he'd have to put up with it.

He did as the men around him, stretching out sore muscles. Jokes were made as bruises, scrapes, and burns were pointed out. Ace rubbed his gut where a couple of head butts had got him. At least the calves didn't have horns. Yet.

"Beth and Amelia sent dinner."

Ranger's announcement turned groans to cheers. He pointed to the wagon Ace hadn't seen arriving. Three big, black pots rested on old horse blankets at the rear of the wagon. An elderly Indian woman pointed her chin to a pile of tin plates. The men turned to him, shuffling their feet.

“You’re the other boss, they have to wait for us before they can eat,” said Ranger. He nodded his thanks as the woman known by all as “Auntie” placed a dollop of something smelling wonderful on the plate.

Ace looked at his hands. Blood and spit, both human and animal, stuck dirt to him from fingernails to elbows. There wasn’t anywhere to wash up. He saw the challenge in the men’s eyes. He might have won the Double Diamond in May, but today he proved he deserved it. He must make an impression, his way. He stood as straight as if he faced his grandfather. He raised an imperious eyebrow and looked around.

“I say, madam, would there be cornbread in that basket?” He spoke like the old man as well, nose in the air, before breaking out in a smile, something his grandfather never did. He then did his best to imitate the man who irritated him during the whole train journey west. “Dayam, Ah’m so hongry ma belly and backbone are saying howdy. Who’s next for grub?”

He grabbed a plate and held it up. When Ranger tossed him a piece of cornbread he caught it out of the air and chomped down. A few ragged cheers erupted before he was pushed along by hungry men.

If his grandfather could see him now, filthy from hat to boots, eating beef and beans from a tin plate with a wooden spoon, he’d have him horsewhipped and thrown off the estate. His father and brother, on the other hand, wouldn’t care what he did as long as his winnings kept them in the latest style.

But that was his old life. It already felt like a bad dream. In front of him was the future. Gold on the hoof. Ranger held up a tin cup of coffee, toasting him on the day’s activities. He nodded back. Life was damn good. Jessie crossed to get a second plateful. His eyes tracked the boy’s back end until he caught himself. He turned away in disgust, both at the boy and his body’s ridiculous reaction.

Though the brat was useful, once they got rid of him, life would

be perfect.

* * * *

Sin stretched his aching back and sat tall as he rode into the Rocking E yard. He didn't think he'd ever been so damn tired. Every muscle, including many he'd never even noticed, hurt. But every time a momma cow and her branded calf went into the Double Diamond herd, the pain went away for a few minutes. They were building their future, and nothing was going to stop him, especially a ferocious pixie cowgirl who knew far more about ranching than he did.

Trace came out of the barn as Sin brought Emperor to a halt. Eighteen hands tall, the Friesian stallion he brought from England was a magnificent horse. Emperor was far more suited to pleasure riding than ranching. One of the first things he'd had to do was trim the animal's flowing mane and tail. It destroyed the look of the breed but was better than having it catch on everything.

Others scoffed at him bringing the horse west when he could have sold him for a huge profit. But the stallion was part of his breeding plan. Let him cover a few prize mares, and their offspring would be even better. Emperor was eager to do his best but hadn't yet had a chance to cover a mare. In that, they were alike.

Bridie and Meggie came out of the barn carrying pails of milk. He smiled and tipped his hat pleasantly. He made Emperor bow, one leg out and head down. The girls laughed and giggled at the trick. Trace cleared his throat in warning. They hurried into the large two-story house, turning to wave at the last moment.

Other than a hat, Trace was naked above the waist. For the first time, Sin saw the white line of corded scars circling his neck. Other scars touched his arms and chest. He barely glanced at Sin but took a long look at Emperor.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Elliott?"

"I've got a foal on the way."

A horse whinnied and stomped in the barn. Trace jerked his head in welcome, turned his back, and strode into the barn. Sin watered Emperor and tied him loosely in the shade. Though the stallion was upwind of the corral, if he smelled a mare in heat nothing would keep him away.

Sin stepped inside the cool, dim barn and stopped. Trace leaned against a restless horse in a loose box. He massaged her swollen belly and scratched what must be her favorite spots.

“You coming in or not?”

“Wanted to make sure the lady was comfortable with strangers. She’s a beauty. Got a bit of Morgan in her?” Sin stepped forward, walking quietly but making sure the horse knew he approached. She lifted her head and looked him over.

“Yep, but the rest of her is pure cow pony. Sapphire can work all day and be ready to go the next morning. Can’t you, girl?”

The horse nodded her head as Sin approached. When Trace moved back, Sin leaned down, nose to nose. He rubbed her nose and told her what a wonderful momma she’d be and how he was there to help her. She shivered her flanks, blew out, and seemed to relax.

“You trying to take my best girl?”

Sin could tell he was only half joking. A cross between this horse and Emperor would be a fine animal.

“Yep, but not this one.” He ignored Trace’s frown, continuing to soothe and talk with Sapphire.

“Bridie and Meggie are children, and you’d have to kill half this valley to touch my Beth,” said Trace in a low, threatening growl. “What’s your game, Statham? Or should I call you ‘Sin’?”

“It’s short for St. John, which we pronounce ‘Sinjin.’ Nothing to do with what’s going through your mind.”

“You don’t know what’s on my mind.”

Sin lifted his hands and backed away from Sapphire at the threat.

“You can see I covet your horse, but I’m no thief. I’d never hurt your lovely wife or touch a child. I’ve got someone else in mind.”

“Who?”

Sin looked at the horse in the early stages of labor. “I think it best we go outside where a few loud words won’t put this lady into a lather.” He gestured outside.

They’d barely cleared the door before Trace grabbed his shirt and slammed him into the barn. Trace was two inches shorter, but his scars showed he knew his way around a barroom fight. Sin could likely take him, but he wanted the Elliotts on his side. He lifted his hands wide.

“It’s about Jessamine.”

“Jessie? She’s in Virginia.” Trace released Sin after a last shake and stepped back. “Or is she?” He straightened up. “What the hell do you know about my sister?”

Sin dropped his hands. He let the back of his head rest against the wall.

“Damn. I thought Ranger told you.” He took off his hat and scratched his head fast, as if his hair was full of lice.

“Told me what?”

Sin settled his hat and met Trace’s icy glare.

“Ranger sent a brat to beg Ace to hire on with the Double Diamond. Just for a few weeks, to prove himself. We’re only paying bed and board, but the kid still wanted the job. Ace thinks Jessie Bonham is a fourteen-year-old boy.”

“Jessie’s here? Shit!” Trace screwed up his mouth and turned his head away. “I thought two years in that fancy school would turn her into a lady.”

“She’s a lady as far as I’m concerned, but she’s also a damn good rancher. I’m the only one who knows, other than Ranger and maybe Patrick.”

“I haven’t seen Jessie in eight years.” Trace gazed at the mountains for a few minutes as if seeing something that wasn’t there. He shook his head and turned to Sin. “I guess two years in skirts can’t make up for over twenty years in a saddle.” One side of his mouth

turned up in what might be a wide grin in another man. “Jessie had a few curves on her last time. She must have more now. They can’t tell?”

“Her hair’s chopped short, she binds her chest and wears a coat even when it’s hot in order to cover her sweet—uh, her back end.”

Trace rubbed his hand over his moustache.

“And Langford thinks she’s a boy?”

“Ace stays a long way from Jessie when he can. He says there’s something about the boy that bothers the hell out of him. He’d fire her if she wasn’t such a good worker.”

The corner of Trace’s lip twitched.

“I saw how Ace looked at Jessie when they met,” said Sin. “She got a rise out of him, which he blames on going without a woman for so long. We don’t have money to waste on whores. I’ll be honest with you. Ace is a man driven to prove himself to the hardest taskmaster in existence. Jessie is more than an irritant. She threatens his sense of self.”

Trace nodded for him to continue.

“The man’s so focused he sees only what’s in front of his face. Lately, that’s been cattle. He’s so tired he’d trip over his own horse if it didn’t move out of his way.”

“And Bennett?”

“Henry stays away as well. He knows something’s up but is keeping it under his hat.”

“You their nursemaid?”

Sin didn’t rise to the jibe.

“We’ve worked as a team since Ace and I stepped in to stop Henry getting pounded at school. Ace is the planning and mathematical genius, with lots of focus and drive. Henry can turn his hand to anything and make it work as long it’s got nothing to do with cards, women or money.”

“And you?”

“I’ve got the strength and ability to make anything they want

happen. I usually stay in the background and watch. When I first saw her passing Baldy's Saloon—"

"What! I'm gonna tan her ass!"

"Mr. Elliott, how old is your sister?"

Trace winced. "Damn, I guess she's older than Beth." The corners of his eyes crinkled. "I'd tan Beth's ass if she went past the Mercantile, and she knows it."

Sin gulped. His cock rose at the thought of Jessie lying across his lap, her round ass waiting for his hand.

"She came from Virginia on the Bride Train, disguised as a boy. She got to Tanner's Ford on her own and found Ranger. She's got more ability and sass than any woman I know, and she's old enough to marry."

"Too old. She's stuck in her ways, ways few men want." Trace turned and went back to soothe Sapphire.

Sin thought of the cold stream rushing downhill and how his cock shriveled when he washed up before saddling Emperor. When he had it under control he followed Trace. It wasn't smart to let a man know he wanted his sister. Especially when he didn't plan to marry her.

"Jessie's right for the Double Diamond," he said to Trace. He cleared his throat. "I came here to ask your permission to court her."

"You want to marry my baby sister?"

"No, sir. I want Ace to marry her. He needs a wife more than Henry and me. He needs the roots that a wife and family will give him."

Marrying into the Elliotts and MacDougals would give Ace so many roots that he'd never leave. Not just the land, but the eight or nine brothers-in-law and their families. As damn near an only child, Sin wanted his children to have lots of family near. Even Henry, the youngest of nine, wanted lots of young ones around.

"How'll you get Ace to marry Jessie when he thinks she's a boy?"

Now he knew Trace was on their side, Sin let the tension release. He leaned his arms on the loose box and rubbed Sapphire's head.

"I believe the lady will be the one pushing the suit. I see how she watches Ace when he doesn't know she's there. It's the same with Ace. And the way she moans when I rub her shoulders—" Sin backed up a step and held his hands up. "Just her sore shoulders." He dropped his hands when Trace grunted and turned his attention back to the horse. "Jessie needs a husband, and soon. If you don't want her with us, I hear the Circle C is hunting for a wife."

"If Ranger figures you're right for Jessie, I won't complain." He rubbed Sapphire behind an ear. "I guess my baby sister's grown up. If she's looking at Ace that way, it's time to find her a husband. Or three." He narrowed his eyes at Sin. "How come you came asking to court her?"

"I don't want eight or nine of her brothers and cousins going after me if she says I kissed her." Sin planned to do one hell of a lot more with Jessie, but a big brother wouldn't want it pointed out. "We've been raised to be honorable gentleman. Unless Jessie makes a move, Ace won't see what's under her padding and binding. He wouldn't touch a virgin unless he planned to marry her."

Neither Sin nor Henry would touch Jessie until Ace claimed her. After that, Sin planned to bed her well, and often.

"He'd better not touch her until after the wedding." Trace looked to the east where the evening star rose in the heavens. "Be good to have the Double Diamond join the family. Other than the Circle C, we'd own this end of the valley."

"Is that an approval?"

Trace made a fist and looked down at it. "Ben's not here, so there's only five of us Elliotts. Five against three ain't bad odds."

Sin braced his feet. He rolled his shoulders and let his hands hang free. "Five against one, and I'll take you any time you like. One at a time or all together."

Trace tilted his head. "Got it bad, have you?"

"That woman—!" He shut up before he said something which would make Trace want to clean his clock.

“You want the Double Diamond to share her, like we do Beth.”

“Only if the lady’s willing.”

“And if she’s not?”

Sin inhaled. He let it out, shaking his head. “Then maybe Ace won’t be the one marrying her. And that would be a pity because without a legal wife to birth Langford sons, he’ll drift.”

“Which would you choose? Your partner or Jessie?”

“I aim to make sure I never have to cross that bridge.”

Trace looked at him, up and down. Sin stuck his hands in his pockets and contemplated the mountains.

“Unless she’s changed, Jessie’s such a wildcat it’ll take three of you to keep her in line.”

“I figure she’s the one who’ll be keeping us in line, Mr. Elliott.”

A smile changed Trace’s face from carved granite to almost handsome.

“You’re a smart man, Statham. This lady could use both of us tonight. It’s her first, so it may take a while.”

“Glad to help as long as you need it.”

“You can put your black in the corral.” He snorted a laugh. “Maybe he’ll be good enough for Nightwind. Ranger brought Jessie’s black mare from Texas. She’s in season, and Ranger’s too busy to keep an eye on her, so he stashed her here. She’s never been bred, too damn picky to let a MacDougal stallion near her. None of mine are good enough for her, either.”

“If Emperor wants to cover her, he’ll find a way. You get the first colt, I get the next.”

Sin shook hands with Trace, sealing an agreement for more than colts. Trace didn’t try to crush Sin’s hand. To Sin’s mind, that meant a man was confident enough in himself that he didn’t have to prove anything.

He unsaddled Emperor and brought him to the corral. He’d barely closed the gate before Emperor’s cock emerged, hard and ready. He snorted and moved toward a large black mare with a white star

between her ears. She bared her teeth and whinnied, but lifted her tail. Usually he enjoyed watching Emperor take a mare, but he was already too damn hard from thinking about Jessie.

He turned for the barn as Emperor reared on his hind legs to cover Nightwind. His damn horse was getting more action than he was, and the situation wasn't likely to change for a while.

Chapter Seven

Doc Henley pulled the rented buggy to a stop in front of the small Double Diamond cabin. He looked around as the August dust, turned up by the wheels, settled. The log cabin had a deserted air to it. Ragged curtains hung in the windows, left over from when the original family lived there. The Sinclairs sold out after saying they never would, and moved to California.

“Langford and his partners haven’t done much to the house since the Sinclairs left, but the barn looks in good shape,” said Doc quietly to Miss Rosa. Ranger had asked them to check on Jessie, knowing both kept many secrets.

“On a ranch, the house is always last to get fixed,” she replied, “especially with bachelors.”

George took his time getting down. At forty-five, he didn’t move as fast as when he was sparking his first wife. That word might not be used much now, but he felt it was right with his wooing of Rosa. She’d been through things that would kill many women, and he was afraid to move too quickly and burn her. A spark now and then, however, might kindle a bit of a flame. He held his arms up. Rosa bit her lip then gave a terse nod. He smiled his approval of her acceptance. He gently lifted her down, gauging how long he could hold her before she began to stiffen in fear. He released her quickly once her feet touched down.

“I got a few more seconds out of you that time, Rosa.” She flushed, but he saw the corner of her mouth twitch. “Since there’s no one here, maybe you want to steal a kiss from me?”

He put his hands behind his back, closed his eyes, and waited.

He'd developed both patience and a knowledge of people over the years. Rosa would come to him when she was ready and not a moment sooner. They rarely got a chance to go sparking where no one could see them, and he wasn't going to miss the chance.

He inhaled her scent, cinnamon and vanilla, as she approached. A warm hand rested on his left shoulder. Her front brushed against his chest. He tightened his grip on his hands. She'd not been so bold before, and he didn't want anything to spook her.

Rosa kissed his shaven cheek. It was just a peck, but he'd take and be happy. Since she didn't remove her hand, he stayed still. She brushed her lips against his, once. He gave her a soft smile of encouragement and opened his eyes. She nodded her acceptance of his praise and backed away. She'd survived being a Comanchero slave from age twelve to eighteen when Miss Lily bought and released her. Luckily, the leader kept her to himself for the first four years before tossing her to his second in command. Surviving the next two years would have killed many women, or at least taken their minds. Though she was terrified of most men, for some reason she trusted, and liked, him. He loved her, with all his heart, and would do anything to have her love. He'd accepted she would never share a bed with him, but he hadn't given up hope they could share a life.

She looked at the basket on the wagon. "If Jessie's not here, we'd better leave the buns in the house."

He handed her the basket, admiring the curve of her breast when she reached for it, and followed her into the cabin. Rosa set the basket down on the scrubbed table and looked around.

"Do you think Jessie's doing all the cooking?"

"Shall we wake her and ask?"

He pointed to the neatly made bed in the corner. Jessie lay on her back, fully dressed except for boots. A cap of short brown curls covered her head. He could make out the stubborn Elliott chin, though it was the size of an elf in comparison to her huge brothers. Freckles speckled her nose and cheeks. From what he could see of her limbs,

she was like a yearling colt, slender and muscled.

“How could anyone think that darling young woman is a boy?”

“Men see what they want to,” replied Rosa.

She walked over to the table, putting her boot heels down sharply. Jessie startled and shot to her feet. A knife appeared in each hand, poised and ready to throw.

“Who the hell are you?”

* * * *

Jessie blinked at the older man and woman. She’d forgotten to make her voice sound low, but it was too late. The old man looked a bit embarrassed, but the woman snorted like a horse.

“Ross teach you how to defend yourself with those knives?”

The woman didn’t wait for Jessie to answer. She turned her back and bent over the table to empty a basket. She pulled out a pie plate and lifted off the cover. Jessie’s mouth flooded at the smell of cinnamon and yeast.

“I’m Rosa, and that handsome man is Doctor Henley. Now, are you gonna put those knives away and have a cinnamon bun, or should I leave all these for your men?”

Jessie absorbed both knives back into their holders and stomped into her boots.

“They’re not my men,” she automatically replied. “Welcome to the Double Diamond, Miss Rosa, Doc. I, uh, better not eat anything you brought. They wouldn’t like a hired boy taking what’s theirs.”

“I brought these for Jessamine Bonham Elliott. I know that’s you, so get your skinny ass over here and hold out your hand.” Rosa cut a square and set it on a tin plate.

Jessie decided to eat now and worry how they knew who she was later. She moaned when she bit into the light dough. She tasted sweet butter, raisins, and spices. She chewed, the texture like nothing else.

“Her ass isn’t skinny, Rosa. It’s round, and fits her body just

right.”

Jessie choked on a mouthful. Doc winked at her.

“It’s skinny compared to mine!”

“I like a woman’s ass to be big and round and kissable.”

“Kissable?” squeaked Rosa. Her face, from forehead to the tight edge of her collar, flushed the color of her name.

Jessie stared as she finished chewing. They looked at each other as if unaware she was in the room. She suddenly realized they were sparking!

“Every inch of you is kissable, Rosa. Inside and out.”

“Excuse me, maybe I’d better go to the barn and let you two, uh, talk.”

“George Henley!” Rosa stuck both fists on her hips and glared.

“You’d better give that present to Jessie before one of the men returns,” said Doc. “Jessie needs it. You can tell me off all the way back to town.”

Rosa, face still flushed, stomped around the table. Doc winked as she passed. She grumbled and almost shoved Jessie out the door. She stomped over to the buggy, took a cloth-wrapped parcel from under the seat, and continued to the barn. Jessie followed, not sure what was going on but willing to find out.

* * * *

Sin unsaddled his horse and turned it into the remuda. He’d seen the trail of dust heading for the cabin but had to take care of a few things before he could get home. He hurried behind the barn on his way toward the house.

“Take off your shirt and show me what you’ve done.”

Sin stopped so fast his upper body kept on going. He caught himself and stood still. Jessie’s little room was in this corner of the barn. The voice was deep, but sounded female, thank God.

“Dammit, girl, how many days and nights have you worn those

bindings?”

“Just since I started here. Um, three days? Four?”

It was Jessie’s voice, but she spoke clearly and used proper grammar.

“I’ve come just in time. Get it off.”

Sin waited, imagining Jessie unwrapping cloth bindings from her chest. His cock twitched in his pants.

“Goodness. You’ve got enough for two women your size!”

A vision of Jessie’s slender body with a set of large, full breasts made his cock ache. He’d expected her to have small breasts to perfectly fit his mouth. Any extra was a bonus.

“They just kept growing, Rosa. I wish they were smaller.”

Rosa was here? That meant Doc was around.

“If you’d worn those bindings any longer, those welts would be even worse. Let me rub on the ointment Doc sent.”

Jessie hissed. Sin heard nothing for a minute. His imagination went wild.

“There, how much does it hurt now?”

“About the same as when Fin MacDougal almost broke a couple of my ribs.”

Sin’s fists formed instantly as rage flowed into him. How could anyone beat a woman, especially one half his size?

“You do anything to get back at him?”

Jessie’s laugh floated past, sinking into his soul. He wanted to make her laugh like that. She sounded somewhat like Henry’s middle sister, the nice one.

“One night Fin drank so much he passed out by the fire. He’d left his pants unbuttoned after he took a leak. I smeared honey over his cock and made a trail to a red ant nest. He was so drunk he didn’t realize until his pants were full of them chomping down. He swelled up so much he couldn’t walk for a days.”

Sin winced when both females laughed. He’d remember that Jessie had an evil mind. In this case the punishment was just.

“There’s many a gal would love to have a figure like yours. Hourglass, they call it. Stuff you in one of those dresses that almost shows your nipples, and you’d rent for lots of gold.”

“How much?”

What? Only the Double Diamond men would ever touch this woman!

“If you did it right, you could sell your virginity six or eight times. Thousands in gold dust. With your looks, if you acted all innocent, you could get away with doing it for a couple of weeks, a different man each night. Put a sponge soaked in chicken blood inside you first, and you’d prove your virginity each time.”

“Eew!”

“I hear you’ve been riding horses astride since you could walk. That usually means you won’t bleed the first time. You’d better use a sponge on your wedding night so your husband will think you’re a virgin.”

“No sponges, thank God. I’m never going to marry and be owned by a man.”

Sin gave a quiet snort. Jessie was ripe for marriage. She just didn’t know it.

“There are so many single men here that you might not have a say in it. More than one innocent girl was married against her will. Now slip your arms into this corset.”

“Why don’t they leave?”

“After a gal’s been raped a few times, she thinks no one would want her.”

Rosa spoke so quietly Sin could barely hear her. Everyone knew Rosa rarely left Miss Lily’s Parlor, or invited any men into her kitchen. For some reason she got along well with Ross, though he resembled the men who held her captive. Now he knew why there was so much shock when she started taking buggy rides with Doc.

“Pull the strings tight. Start at the top to squash them down.”

It was a crime to press Jessie’s full breasts flat. He wanted them to

be free, and proud, and in his hands. Or mouth. He wasn't particular as long as both happened often.

"What about love and children?" continued Rosa.

"Love made me an orphan, and I don't need to marry to have a man in my bed. When I'm a partner on the Bitterroot with my brothers, any children I have will belong to us."

"If your belly starts swelling without a ring on your finger, there's gonna be a whole mess of Elliotts and MacDougals tracking down whoever done it to you. They'd catch him and make you marry him so fast—"

"Every single one of them has hopped into bed with dozens of women and never married them. They know I wouldn't marry a man I didn't love, just because we had sex."

"I thought you said you didn't want love."

Sin leaned closer for Jessie's answer.

"I meant that you can love too much. My father died rather than live without my mother. I would never love a man that much. And if I don't marry, my children would always come first. Why put up with a husband when my children would have all those uncles?"

"A man has different ideas about what he does to women, and what another man does to his sister. Put your shirt back on and tuck it in."

"Nothing could make me marry unless I wanted to!"

Sin thought of his parents. Though they detested each other, they married to keep certain property within the families. They'd coupled enough to provide the required heir and spare, though it took eight years before the spare arrived, meaning himself. His dark-haired father cursed him all his life, saying he was his wife's adulterous child from a common blacksmith or farrier. His mother denied touching another man before Sin's birth, though she moved to Town and left him behind as soon as possible. She only returned to host weeks-long parties filled with bed-hopping games.

For some reason the village farrier and blacksmith, both dark-

haired men with sweet wives, took a liking to him. While they gave him the love and attention he craved, it only fanned the rumors. Though he learned both trades and grew into his muscles, he had few friends other than Ace and Henry. Unless his friends were visiting, he stayed in the cottages where he knew he was welcome.

Title and property or an ancient name meant nothing to him. It was what was in the heart that counted. If Jessie had no one and nothing but the clothes on her back, he would feel the same way about her.

Ace, however, needed society's touch of approval. The Elliotts were the local gentry according to Western society. They'd lived there the longest and created their wealth rather than inherited it. All Henry wanted was a big family and a chance for adventure.

Jessamine Bonham Elliott was perfect for all of them.

She might insist her brothers couldn't make her marry, but Sin knew different. Jessie loved her brothers and would not want to be banished from the valley for refusing to marry. If she was compromised, he had a good idea what the Elliotts would do to the man who refused to marry her. He'd make sure Ace wouldn't get beaten to death.

Chapter Eight

“If that damned kid can do it, so can I.”

Ace shook out the loop in his lariat until it was just the right size. He held it between his thumb and finger. He wiggled the other fingers, keeping them loose. With one motion he swung the rope over his head, around once, and let go.

He grinned. The loop was perfect. It sailed up, up—

It jerked to a stop and fell to the ground with a thud six feet from the stump he aimed at. He looked at his left hand. It gripped the rope instead of letting it flow to follow the loop.

“Blast!”

Someone cleared their throat. He gathered up the rope, keeping the loops in the right direction. Sin or Henry would speak up instead of asking for his attention. No, they knew him so well that they’d stay far away when he was this furious.

“Unless you wish to be horsewhipped, I strongly suggest you turn your horse around and go your merry way.”

“Cain’t rightly do that, Mister Ace.”

The boy sniffed loudly and then spat. Ace compressed his jaw. If he jammed his teeth together, he wouldn’t grind them. He wanted to grind the boy’s face into the dirt along with the grin at his expense he was sure the lad sported.

“And why is that?”

“Cuz I got me a message fer ye.”

“Because you have a message for me.”

“Yep.”

“Say it.”

Silence. Another sniff. "It?"

Ace whirled around. The boy slumped on the ugly white horse about ten feet away. Both of them looked lazy and half asleep. Unfortunately, he knew it was just an illusion. Boy and horse could work him into the ground any day and twice on Sunday, blast it! Brawn would come to the boy as he grew, but never a brain. Ace could keep that thought from driving him mad.

"Because you have a message for me," Ace repeated.

The boy blinked. If Ace did that to any of the prefects at school, he'd be bent over and have six of the best applied to his backside. Ace's cock jumped at the thought of applying his hand to Jessie's bare ass. He fought it down again. He enjoyed women, not boys, especially one who didn't have enough brains or education to speak properly!

"Say, speaking exactly as I do, 'because you have a message for me.'"

"Bee-kauze yew have a mes-sage four meee." The boy nodded. "Only I gots one fer yew. Doc and Miss Rosa brought them cinnnyman buns fer ye. They's almost gone so's if'n ye wants one, ye'd better get home quick smart."

The boy made his horse rear. He turned it around on its back feet and raced back to the cabin. No doubt to eat the last of Miss Rosa's treat.

"Bloody hell!"

Ace clutched the lariat in his right hand, fuming. Why did the brat want to get his goat so badly? He'd heard Jessie talking with Sin and Henry. While the boy's speech needed help, it was nothing like the way he spoke to Ace. Did the boy do it out of fear, or because he knew it bugged his ass?

Stupid question. The kid wasn't afraid of anything. And if he didn't need the kid's knowledge and ability, he'd fire him so fast his head would spin.

Ace tilted his head back and inhaled. He could do this. The kid

had been roping since he could toddle. He, on the other hand, spent his first five years living with servants in a cottage, the next two in the big house with tutors and then was sent away to school. Latin, Greek, and the theories of Pythagoras were not needed in Montana Territory.

His ability with numbers and memory had won them the Double Diamond and the cattle he had hopes of one day roping. Excellent planning skills kept things running though they had not one ounce of gold to spare. The kid didn't eat much and slept in the barn. They couldn't do this without him, damn his eyes!

Ace picked up the rope and set his feet. He loosened the fingers of his left hand. This time when he let go the lariat floated high. It landed over the stump, thereby "roping" his first beast. Exultation expanded his chest. He flicked the rope so the end jumped off the stump. The next step was to rope something moving. Add trying to do it from the back of a moving horse...

No. Concentrate on today. Rosa brought some of her famous cinnamon buns, and he was bloody well going to enjoy them. The kid better not have eaten more than one, or he'd tan his hide!

* * * *

A week later, with Patrick and Ranger's cattle now with them at the Bitterroot Ranch, Jessie's thighs no longer screamed in pain with every step. It would be wonderful if she could sneak away and soak her aches in the hot spring. But it was too dangerous. If one of the men followed her, they'd discover she was no boy.

Thanks to Miss Rosa's present, she could breathe. It wasn't too difficult to unloosen the corset's strings when she rode out in the morning and tighten them when the men were around. She did it at night as well. Wearing a corset was bad enough in a dress, but you did little but sit straight and step, slowly and gracefully, across a room. Wearing a corset while working cattle made a gal appreciate how wonderful it was to have fresh air deep in your lungs.

The Double Diamond men still hobbled around a bit every morning and evening, but none of them said a word of complaint. They also didn't complain when she corrected them on things such as roping. Except Ace. To him, she was a sawed-off runt almost too young to tie his shoes, much less shave.

He ordered her to do one thing, then another. She could tell even Sin and Henry were getting fed up with him. She had her own way to get back at him. He spoke with such an upper-crust accent, all sneering and superior. She couldn't help speaking like a po'boy who wouldn't recognize grammar if he tripped over it.

When Ace looked at her, she felt...strange was the only word she could think of. Though she wanted to geld him with her knife half the time, he made her feel a bit shivery. Something about his total confidence in himself made him attractive. Of course, the fact that she did many things better goaded him to act even more superior. She pretended to completely misunderstand his biting wit, taking him at his word rather than his meaning.

Only when she was alone in the barn did she let loose a chuckle. The man was smart as well as educated. Too bad he took himself so seriously. Put him in a suit, and the girls in Virginia would swoon. She watched him once when he didn't know she was in the barn. Trouble had caught a stone, and she'd brought him back midday. Ace came out of the cabin wearing only his hat. He carried a pair of dripping pants in front of him. She admired his broad chest, following the line of hair. His semi-rigid cock rose out of a dark nest, strong and thick. He hung his pants from a nail on one of the posts holding up the short roof overhang.

She'd seen naked men lots of times, but she was related to them. The muscles of Ace's back flexed when he moved, and so did the ones in his ass. His smooth cheeks were concave on the sides, curving around the back.

She watched him, knowing it was rude but unable to turn away. She rubbed between her legs, thinking of him like a stallion about to

mount a mare. He would be proud and erect, knowing what she needed and more than ready to provide it.

A couple of nights since then, when she could stay awake long enough, she put her fingers to good use as she remembered what he looked like. She imagined him kissing her neck and touching her aching breasts. He'd lay her on her back and she'd lift her legs wide so he could enter her. Or he'd kneel behind her and enter her like a horse, thrusting hard and deep.

That's what the women she spied on from the loft of MacDougal barn did. No lanterns were allowed in the barn, so she couldn't really see anything. The women would squeal, though, urging her brothers and cousins to do more. Usually they shared the women because it took so much effort to get one all the way from town to the MacDougal ranch. Every couple of months they'd manage to get one home, and Jessie would try to watch from the hayloft. She had no other way of finding out how a woman behaved around men.

No man in Virginia made her want to take off her clothes and let him touch her like that. But Ace did. And Sin, and Henry. Ace moved with determination, as if he was the boss of the world. When she bested him, he'd grit his teeth and glare. She knew it was only a matter of time before he proved he could be better than her. He'd find something, just to prove it.

What would it be like to lie down with a man so masterful? One who knew his way around a woman and could show her what she'd been missing?

She shifted in the saddle, rubbing her pussy against the hard leather. If she stood in her stirrups and leaned forward, could she rub herself against the saddle horn? Naw, she'd better concentrate on work.

She turned her horse to ride even higher above the ranch. She should check out the draws and gulches where longhorns might get stuck. It was best to get a good idea of potential problems and fix them before problems happened. She'd report them to the boss,

recommending which areas they should block off.

“You think I should talk to Ace, Trouble?”

The horse flicked an ear.

“You’re right. I’ll draw them on paper and leave it on the table for him to find.”

She could recommend all she liked. If Ace didn’t like what she said, he ignored her. He did that a lot. For some reason, he’d been mad at her right from the start. Of course, she’d egged him on, but how else was she going to put up with his arrogance?

Sin told her Ace’s older brother was the Earl of Denby and lived in this huge palace in England. All of them were younger brothers of aristocrats. Though their families might have money and property, they’d inherit nothing since the eldest got everything. She admired their gumption at wanting to make their own way. So far, they’d done well, though almost all of it came from a game of cards.

At least they knew how to work hard. All of them stayed in the saddle as long as she did, every day. Henry and Sin slept in the cabin’s loft while Ace took the corner bed. She went in and put the coffee on every morning. The smell woke them, and they’d grunt their thanks. Ace, sleeping in the bed across the room from her, wouldn’t even lift his head.

The few times she did catch him looking, he had a strange look on his face. He’d bellow at her to get out and saddle the horses. She’d throw down whatever she was holding and slam the door behind her.

Once, she stuck out her tongue at his back while they were riding. He’d whipped his head around and caught her. She’d kicked Trouble and raced off before he could thrash her. She figured he was the type to take a switch to a boy’s bare backside. She remembered how much that hurt and wanted nothing to do with it.

Plus, if she dropped her pants and bent over he’d get a big surprise. The way he hated her, he probably would wallop her behind, tell her to pull up her pants and get back to work. Worse, he might fire her, and then Ranger wouldn’t let her be a partner in the Bitterroot.

Now, if she dropped her pants in front of Sin...

Sin would slide his magic fingers around her backside and stroke her pussy. She knew it would feel better than when she touched herself. She overheard her brothers talking about it feeling far better when a woman had her hand on their cock, so the opposite should be true.

She automatically kept her head lower than the ridge as she approached one of the streams that brought freezing water down from the mountains. She couldn't figure out how the same mountains held hot springs. There was one on the Double Diamond above the cabin, but she hadn't said a word about it. When she was finished with her three weeks she was going to strip off her corset and soak away all her aches in the hot water. She passed the halfway mark already, with about ten days left to go.

She dismounted to check tracks. Deer and elk, of course, as well as antelope. She'd mention the large paw tracks to Ace. The claws meant they were wolves. Texas longhorns knew how to protect themselves, but a hungry pack would gladly make a meal out of a few calves.

On a hunch, she splashed along the stream for a bit. She crouched at a mark that looked suspiciously like a horse. There were some wild ones around, but no wild horse wore a metal shoe. She cast around farther, discovering many more tracks as well as the remains of quirleys. A shod horse could have gotten loose, but cigarette remains proved someone human was around. She looked down the slope. A person standing here could look into the homestead yard. It was too far to see detail, but with a spyglass they'd know if anyone was home.

Who would gain from that knowledge?

Frederick Smthye lost the ranch to Ace. Had he sent men to cause problems? Or was this an example of her brothers and cousins keeping an eye on her? She didn't think any of them smoked. Since she couldn't tell if the sign was from friend, foe or family, she'd keep the information to herself. For now.

She followed the ridge, mentally marking narrow gulches, streams, and well-watered places where the grass was still green this late in the summer. She found a few sheltered places where she could lie naked under the sun, just as she did when she was young.

Having seen Ace naked, and felt Sin's fingers on her back, she didn't want to lie alone. She wanted them to do to her what she saw the boys doing in the barn.

One hot Saturday night Ben, Nevin, Patrick, Ranger, and Ross snuck a couple of women home. She often slept in the hayloft with the cats on a hot night. That night she was furious, as The MacDougal told her he would never, ever let her go to town because she was a girl. She was not to be seen by the rough men who came into the cantina for a drink.

She woke to an unusual sound—a woman's happy laughter. She peeked over the edge of the hayloft. Luckily, the moon was bright enough for her to see. She saw the naked white shapes of her brothers and the smaller ones of two women. Instead of being worried with five men there, the women seemed eager to touch and be touched.

She tried to figure out what was going on, but they moved into a corner. She was sure her brothers took care of one woman while the two MacDougals made the other scream her release. Because it was so dark, she hadn't figured out how. All she knew was that the women begged to have their breasts and pussies touched, demanding more.

A week later they sent her to Virginia to become a lady.

Chapter Nine

Jessie had only one section left to check. She headed Trouble toward a cleft only visible from above.

“Well, I’ll be darned.”

She’d ridden past the rock many times from below and never knew it broke into two. From above, she saw a space wide enough for a yearling to go in headfirst. Getting it out would be murderous.

Trouble balked when she got within six feet of the rock. She urged the horse forward but it shook its head and danced sideways.

“What’s in there, Trouble?”

She sat still and listened but didn’t hear a rattlesnake. After all the poisonous critters in Texas, a rattler didn’t scare her much. At least it was big enough to see and let you know it was near. She climbed down and tied Trouble to a branch. She looked around for cat or wolf scat, but the hard, rocky ground showed nothing.

She sniffed as she approached the rock. She wrinkled her nose. Something had died in there a while back. She yanked on the brush covering the rock split, expecting it to be rooted in the ground. Branches came loose in her hands and she fell back. She slid for a couple of feet on her ass before her hip smacked against a rock.

The thick branches in her hands were sliced clean at the roots. The cuts were grey, the outer bark curling, so it hadn’t been cut recently. Someone had a reason to hide that cleft. She scrambled back up the slope and carefully approached. This time she gently tugged on the brush screen. It came free easily. She tossed it away and stepped closer. The path zigzagged before she stepped clear, finding an open area about fifteen feet by ten.

The remains of three heads stared at her. Human. Her stomach heaved. She covered her mouth and swallowed.

“No wonder you didn’t want to come here, Trouble.”

Just speaking aloud made her feel better. Not much, but enough. She screwed her eyes shut for a moment and, as Ross and Nevin had taught her, looked to *see*.

The limbs weren’t pulled apart too much to identify the bodies. Carrion birds and smaller four-legged animals had done as nature intended. The one facing her was an adult male. His arms looked like they’d been behind him. She tilted her head, finding a rusty manacle still around one wrist. His boots were gone, but the rest of him was dressed. His brown-haired skull slumped sideways, jaw open as if he tilted his head and laughed.

A child curled into a C faced the left rock wall. Pants and a shirt meant it was a boy. His boots were gone as well. The brown hair left on his scalp was short, like his father.

The one in front of her was spread-eagled, bones tugged apart by hungry teeth. Long blonde hair proved the body was female. It was naked except for one black shoe. A welcome breeze cut the smell. Something fluttered on the brush to her right. She looked closer. A faded pink flowered dress, ripped up the middle. A pair of dirty white drawers hung from another branch. Someone had attached them so the branch protruded through a leg, like a trophy flag.

“Oh, God, no!”

Jessie scrambled out of there so fast Trouble startled when she appeared.

She fell to her knees, retching. When she could haul herself to her feet she stumbled toward Trouble. The horse danced sideways, but Jessie had no time for nonsense. She hauled herself into the saddle and raced for the cabin as fast as she could. She trusted Trouble to get her there because she could see nothing through her tears.

* * * *

Ace saw the small boy on the ugly white horse galloping downhill toward them.

“Blast it, boy! Slow down!” he yelled.

Sin ran from the barn as the brat neared. “What the hell’s got into Jessie?”

“I don’t know, but if he injures that horse I’ll whip him so hard he’ll not sit—”

“They’re dead!” screamed Jessie.

The boy slid off the ugly horse, grabbing the saddle to stay upright. Snot and tears covered his face.

Sin pulled him into his arms and pressed the snotty face against his shirt. “Shh, I’ve got you. Breathe, so you can talk.” Jessie shuddered. His thin arms wrapped around Sin’s waist.

Though Ace was fastidious by nature, he felt a stab of—jealousy?—at Sin holding the boy so familiarly. No, not jealousy. Someday when he was a father, he wanted his child to turn to him like that. When clean, of course.

“I was looking for p-places where cattle could get caught. I squeezed through between a split rock and, and—I found a family,” said Jessie between hiccups. “Three of them. They tied the man’s hands behind the tree, and then they...oh, God!”

“You’re doing great,” murmured Sin. He kissed the kid’s hair. Ace frowned. He hadn’t seen the boy without a hat before. Brown curls covered his head. The sun bounced light off them. Ace shook himself out and stepped back. Suddenly, he was furious. Sin paid no attention to him, too busy soothing the brat.

“What family?” yelled Ace.

Jessie pushed himself out of Sin’s arms when Ace yelled. The boy wiped his face with his sleeves.

“I think they used to own this land. Ranger told me Smythe said they went to California. But they didn’t go anywhere. Someone murdered them!”

Ace saw more tears welling. The small chin quivered. If he didn't do something the child would fall apart. He did the same thing the man who raised him for the first five years, would do.

"Stop acting like a girl and pull yourself together. They're dead. They've been dead for at least a year. They're not going anywhere tonight." Jessie's wide eyes stared at him. At least he had the boy's attention. "Your horse is all lathered. Go take care of it. And wash your face. It's covered in snot!"

Sin growled something at him, but he turned his back and marched away. Let them think he was a bastard. Sometimes a leader had to be.

"Where you going, Langford?"

Sin hadn't called him that, using that tone, in a long, long time. For some reason he was protective of the boy. What Sin did with Jessie was not his problem.

"We need the sheriff before it gets dark. If you want to do something constructive, close off the area so it doesn't get disturbed. And make sure that boy takes care of his horse, or he'll get six of the best when I return."

"The best what?" asked Jessie in a small voice.

"When we were in school, the masters used wooden canes on our backsides," explained Sin. "'Six of the best' means six hard strokes."

Ace listened to the silence as he saddled his horse.

"Nobody beats my ass with a stick!"

Ace choked a laugh. He wouldn't use a stick. He'd use his bare hand, skin on skin. And he'd slide his fingers—

He stumbled back from the horse, hands tightly fisted. What the hell was the matter with him? He'd never, ever touch a child, boy or girl! So why did Jessie make him want to do those things?

He quickly finished saddling his horse and rode off. He saw Jessie out of the corner of his eye. The boy had moved far from the cabin. Jessie glared at him, jaw clenched, and snapped a long whip. The top of a weed shot away. He did it again, to prove it was no accident.

Ace felt his cock shrivel. If he ever had inappropriate feelings for the boy again, all he had to do was remember that picture. He bet Jessie imagined the whip snapping off pieces off Ace's body, rather than the tips of weeds.

"Blast," muttered Ace to his horse. "Another bloody thing the boy excels at."

* * * *

"It's the Sinclairs, all right."

Sheriff Chambers scowled in the lamplight. Three bodies waited on the wagon behind the barbershop. In the morning George Byers would build three coffins. Not four. Molly, the daughter, was missing. If she was alive, she'd be sixteen. The last time anyone saw the pretty girl she had long, blonde hair like her mother. It explained why the girl was taken rather than killed. She'd be worth a lot of gold.

"What happened, Frank?"

He looked around for the speaker, but all he saw was a wall of men. He'd never been a tall man, and the last few years he'd lost an inch. Every damn man from the valley and half the town filled his jail. Too many were over six feet. From the angry comments, someone must have said how they found the Sinclairs. If Smythe was in town, they would have lynched him by now.

"Listen up! I'm only going to say this once. And fer Christ's sake, could you move back so I can see more than a foot in front of me?"

"Better stand on your desk, Frank. We're a mite too agitated."

Frank grumbled at Trace's suggestion but followed it. The grumbles died when he stared out at them.

"First, there's no proof who murdered the Sinclair family. They were found up on the ridge of what's now the Double Diamond Ranch."

"I got gold says Smythe had something to do with it!"

Frank didn't catch who yelled the comment, but most of the room

nodded.

“Jennet said he paid out the gold in full,” said Frank. “They could have been robbed as they made their way east.”

“I don’t trust that pompous banker.”

“It’s mighty suspicious.”

“Them miners coulda done it.”

“What about road agents? Smythe told everyone he bought them Sinclairs out with gold. They coulda gone after ’em.”

“What did you find?” As usual, Trace’s rasp cut through everyone else.

“The man’s hands were shackled behind his back, around a tree.” Frank took off his hat and waited until the hubbub died down. It was too personal to use names. “I figure they killed the boy first.” He certainly hoped they did. A quick death with a knife would be a blessing. “When they were finished with his wife, they killed her too then rode away. Don’t know how long it took the man to die.”

Frank rubbed a shaking hand over his face. He was getting too damn old to see what evil happened to good people. He looked around the room. Should he say it? If he didn’t, it was bound to come out anyway.

“They hung his wife’s dress and drawers like a flag, marking the spot like a trophy.”

“Fuck!”

“Lynch the bastards!”

“Smythe better not come near or—”

Frank held up his hand. It took a while, but the room finally stilled.

“Their little girl, Molly, wasn’t there. She was fifteen last year.”

Silence as every man swallowed.

“Don’t she have long, blonde hair like her ma? Used to sing like a canary, so sweet it made yer teeth hurt?”

Frank nodded at Walt Chamberlain’s question. The man’s face crumpled. He slumped and turned away. Frank wished he could do

the same.

“Someone might have seen a pretty blonde girl,” continued Frank. “Mind you, she might not be so pretty by now.”

“As long as she was worth something, they’d keep her alive,” said Ranger. “Maybe she was sold to a sporting house in Bannack or Virginia City.”

“I’ll ask Miss Lily,” said Trace. “I’m putting out a reward for a hundred dollars for every man brought to justice.” He glared around the room. “I mean proof, in a court of law. I expect Lily will match the amount.”

“Add another from the MacDougals for the lass,” bellowed Gillis. His face was redder than normal, and he blinked rapidly, likely from thinking of his baby daughter. If someone harmed Hope, Frank might find the remains sliced into pieces by the great sword hanging over the MacDougal fireplace. Highland Scot justice.

Over five hundred dollars was pledged in the next few minutes. Frank expected others would add to the amount as soon as they knew about it. The situation was every caring man’s nightmare.

“No one goes after them,” said Frank, raising his voice over the mumbles of approval. “This is too big to have someone go off half-cocked. We do this right. That means we follow the law.” He caught every eye in the room, not looking away until they nodded agreement. “Most important is saving Molly. When she’s safe, or we know she’s dead, then we go after who did it.”

Frank climbed off his desk as the men cleared out, all but Trace, Sin, and Ranger. He expected to see Ranger and maybe Trace stick around, but Sin was a surprise. Taller than Trace and blond to their dark, he waited behind the Elliots. While he said nothing, Frank felt the fury radiating off him like a forest fire.

“You boys got something to talk to me about?”

Trace nodded.

“Thanks for not saying who found the Sinclairs,” said Ranger.

Frank looked from one hard face to another. It hadn’t taken him

more than a few minutes to figure out who “Jessie” was. He couldn’t believe the others didn’t know. Ace, for instance. There was something between them, but Jessie was too innocent to recognize it. Ace, totally focused on making the ranch work, didn’t realize the “boy” was a woman.

“You mean Jessamine Elliott?” Frank looked at Sin. The man nodded. His big man’s chin jutted forward, lips pressed tight.

Frank held all traces of expression off his face. He’d thought Sin’s anger was directed toward saving Molly, but his protection extended to Jessie, as well. Now that he thought of it, Sin stayed close to Jessie all the way from the Double D. When they dismounted at the scene, Jessie stood slightly behind him and pointed. Sin had the look of a smitten man, yet Jessie also looked to Ace. Frank mentally tucked the tidbit in the back of his hatband. One or the other, another wedding was surely on the way. Mary would be pleased when he told her about it. His wife loved weddings. He’d put his bet on Ace standing in front of a preacher. While Sin wanted Jessie, it was clear Ace was the chief of the operation.

“What do you want me to do, or not do, about the ‘lad’?” asked Frank.

“We don’t want anyone to know Jessie’s female,” said Trace. “Doc said he’d keep quiet. Now we want your word on it.”

“How long you think you can keep it a secret?”

“All we need is another week or so,” said Ranger. “Soon as Jessie’s three weeks are up with the Double Diamond, she’ll hightail it over to the Bitterroot and demand I take her on as a full partner.”

“You planning on doing that?”

“Hell, no!” Ranger scowled. “Why you think I made her work for the Double D?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you explain it to me, son?”

“I’d like to hear this,” agreed Sin. He settled back on his heels and crossed his arms.

Ranger looked at Frank, then Sin. He shrugged. It was such a

small motion he might not even be aware he'd done it.

"Just before Patrick and I left Texas, we found out The MacDougal's got plans for Jessie to marry Fin Junior. I couldn't get word to her." He heaved a sigh. "I was so damned glad when she showed up as the herd came past town."

"Another thing you hid from me," growled Trace to his younger brother. "My baby sister comes home, and it took Sin to tell me."

"I knew you'd 'protect' her so much she'd never find a husband."

Frank motioned for Trace to deal with his brother later. "What's that got to do with the Double Diamond?"

Ranger raised an eyebrow at Sin, who gave the same back. He focused on Frank.

"Ace, Sin, and Henry joined the herd when we were a few days south of here. I watched how they worked and took measure of them. They rode well but had a lot to learn. They worked damned hard with no complaints. I liked what I saw. I asked Trace about them, since they're valley neighbors."

"I already figured out why," said Trace.

"Jessie was so damn eager to buy in with Ben, Patrick, and me. I couldn't turn her away, but, dammit, she needs to get married, and not to Fin MacDougal!" Ranger turned to Sin. "I figured one of you three would make a damn good husband for my sister." Ranger's shoulders relaxed, and he snorted a laugh. "From the way things are done in this valley, I guess all three of you'll be her husband. If, that is, she marries one of you."

They all looked at Sin. His eyes almost twinkled, and a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Ace will marry Jessie," said Sin. "He just doesn't know it yet."

"He'd better not touch her before the wedding," growled Trace. He held up a finger and pointed it at Sin like a revolver. "None of you better touch her."

"What does Jessie think of this plan of yours?" asked Frank.

Her brothers groaned and cursed.

“She better not find out until she’s happily married,” replied Ranger. He grimaced and scratched his beard stubble. “Otherwise she’ll use the skills Ross taught her and stake me out by a red ant nest.” He chuckled and turned to Frank. “She did it once to Fin, only she put honey in a trail to his unbuttoned pants. He was passed out drunk and didn’t notice until the bites woke him. Just thought you might need to know she has a wicked way of getting back if someone hurts her.”

All four men winced.

Ranger’s smile faded. “Fin liked to hurt her. The MacDougal kept us from her as much as possible. We taught her all we could, so she could protect herself.”

Trace pressed his lips together so hard they turned white. He turned to Ranger. “It hurt like hell to let you four go to The MacDougal when Ma and Pa died. I wanted to keep you, but—”

“You weren’t much more than a kid back then,” replied Ranger quietly. He met Trace’s eyes and shrugged away the past. “It’s the way it is. We’re all here, now.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know if Fin will come after her, but The MacDougal plans to put her inheritance into more land. As long as Jessie’s married before Fin shows up, she’ll be fine.”

“I take it Jessie doesn’t like this man,” stated Sin.

“He’s as mean as a wolverine with a couple of rotten teeth,” said Ranger. “Fin’s hated Jessie ever since she was a kid. She stands up to him, and he doesn’t like it. The night Louisa got married, he attacked her—”

“What!”

Ranger held up both hands to hold back Trace and Sin’s outrage.

“She damn near gelded him,” continued Ranger, grinning. “Ross taught her never to go anywhere without a couple knives. Fin never expected her to carry one under her dress.”

“That’s my little sister,” said Trace with a hint of a smile. He raised an eyebrow in warning. Sin shifted his hand to cover his belt

buckle and what lay behind it. “The MacDougal promised Pa he’d take care of Jessie. As Clan Chief, he thinks that means marrying Jessie to his oldest son, Fin Junior.”

“That man will touch Jessie over my dead body,” declared Sin quietly.

“I doubt Fin would leave Texas,” said Ranger. His frown lightened. “If he did, he’d get an education. The MacDougal name won’t protect him outside Texas. I’d pay to see someone take that bastard apart.” Ranger rubbed his hands eagerly. “Hell, I’d pay someone to watch me do it!”

“If this Fin MacDougal’s out of the picture, all we have to do is get Ace and Jessie together,” said Sin. “Once he realizes she’s a woman, and available, I think he’ll smarten up and propose.”

“From what I see, they can’t stand each other,” said Frank. He gave the young bucks an innocent look, hiding his knowledge from years of marriage to a strong wife.

“Ace gets a hard-on when he looks at what he thinks is a fourteen-year-old boy,” said Sin. “He doesn’t like that, so he keeps far away from Jessie.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t have to see her to get a hard-on,” drawled Sin. “Just thinking about her—”

“That’s my little sister you’re talkin’ about,” growled Trace. “You’d better keep your pecker in your pants until after the wedding.”

Sin leaned a shoulder against the wall and met Trace’s glare head-on. “Jessie will marry into the Double Diamond,” he said quietly. “But she’s a grown woman and will make her own decisions.”

Frank hid a smile at the challenge. It was about time Trace had someone to butt heads with. Trace’s fingers curled into fists. Sin raised an eyebrow and flexed his crossed arms. Even through the material, Frank could see large muscles move. Sin had two inches and a couple dozen pounds on Trace, but Trace was wily. Though he’d banned the older Elliots from town for fighting, he’d love to see a

knock-down, drag-'em-out fistfight between the Elliotts, MacDougals, and Double Diamond men. A real free-for-all where the idea was to let off steam and have a good time.

"You've got a wife to go home to," said Sin to Trace. "Ranger and me, we're stuck with plenty of nothing. The best we can get is a rise in our pants."

"Speak for yourself," said Ranger. "At least you got a wife in sight, thanks to me."

"I thought you said Ben would bring a wife when he returns from the East," said Frank.

"My twin's never broken a promise, but this time...?" Ranger scowled. "Ben's a lawyer now. He thinks more about what's between a gal's ears than under her dress. He'd end up with a brainy sourpuss who talks about things that don't matter a damn and won't share her bed on a cold night." He sighed. "I don't expect to have a wife until Patrick heads East in a couple-three years."

Frank, Sin, and Trace looked at Ranger. He shrugged. "No decent woman wants a rough cowboy like me. If Ben doesn't bring one, Patrick will wrassle a woman to the altar for us."

Frank let the silence ring for a moment before speaking. "So, boys, how you gonna get Ace and Jessie married?"

"First we have to stop her talking to him with an accent so thick it's hard to understand what she's saying." Sin smiled, perhaps in admiration. "Drives Ace nuts."

"Everything about Jessie drives Ace nuts," said Trace. "That's why Beth says they want each other."

"Beth knows about Jessie?" Ranger looked at Sin, then they both glared at Trace.

"I don't keep much from my wife, but I keep a fair bit from my brothers."

"Thanks a hell of a lot for the warning," muttered Ranger. He shut his mouth when Trace shot him a trail boss look. They might both head ranches, but Trace would always be the oldest brother.

“This morning I caught the two of them sneaking glances at each other. Beth says that means they don’t want to admit what they feel.” Trace shared a well-married husband look with Frank. “Ace snarls at Jessie. She answers him in a way that would bring Beth a spanking. Jessie stomps off, and Ace glares like he wants to take her over his knee but for some reason, won’t.”

“The reason being, he thinks Jessie is a boy,” said Sin.

Ranger grinned. “Soon as Ace figures out that Jessie-the-woman has been sassing him for weeks, he’s gonna make sure she can’t sit down for a while.”

“He’d better not touch her until after the wedding,” growled Trace once more. “Beth also says a woman needs a home of her own. Jessie’s not been welcomed in a home since Ma died. Building her one would make her feel more settled. Might get her to nest a bit.”

“We have a cabin—”

Ranger snorted at Sin. “It leaks air like a window. My sister lived in Texas for years, then in a fine house in Virginia. She’s not used to the cold.”

“I’ll order some squared timbers and other supplies,” said Trace. “They’ll be ready to go when needed.”

“We don’t take charity,” declared Sin quietly. He stood straight, hands by his sides.

“We owe Jessie more than you know, and we’d be doing it for her, not you lot,” said Ranger. His neck and cheeks flushed a bit. “Beth’s right. Jessie needs her own home.

“First she’d better get married,” said Frank.

“I want the wedding before the bedding,” growled Trace.

“That’s up to Jessie,” said Sin quietly.

Chapter Ten

Ace settled himself comfortably on his horse and looked at his ranch. His, along with Sin and Henry. They'd all given up a lot to make a new life here in this wild country, but they'd gained as well. His eyes closed in spite of his need to keep going. They'd all worked almost day and night for the past few months, ever since he won it all from Smythe.

Sin and Henry could snore all night, but he had to make plans for all contingencies. He didn't think he'd slept more than a couple of hours a night since he threw down three of a kind and won it all.

Thanks to the insolent brat, they'd learned how to do the tasks required to run the Double Diamond. Not everything and not very well, but it would come with practice. They'd have lots of opportunity to do it themselves now that the three weeks were up.

If that boy wasn't so good at what he did, Ace would have thrashed him a dozen times a day during the last three weeks. He knew Jessie used that blasted accent just to push him. He'd overheard discussions where it seemed the boy might even have read a book or two.

His cock twitched, as it did every time he thought of, spoke to, or saw Jessie Bonham. He shifted in the saddle, cursing his need for a woman. Only two ranches in the valley had wives, so he wasn't the only one wanting. Maybe he'd invite the Circle C, Flying X, and J Bar C over to celebrate their misery together with his last bottle of good whiskey.

It would be a long time before they could afford anything but rot gut. But the Double Diamond had no debt, and he'd keep it that way.

No borrowing gold and no taking help with a future debt to be paid. He would not be beholden to anyone.

It would still be busy for the next few weeks until they joined Ranger to take the steers to Bannack City. Once the steers were gone, he'd sleep. The gold would buy food for the winter. The log cabin needed chinking, but he had time. Lying in bed at night he could see stars from between the logs. A cool breeze was nice now, but there was much to be done to survive winter. He believed the warnings about Montana Territory weather.

When they were ready, they'd build a home in the lower part of the valley, not far from the river and road to Tanner's Ford. It wouldn't be until one of them married, however.

A flash of white to his left caught his eye. Was someone riding near the ridge above the cabin? He backed his horse into the brush and got out his eyeglass. He opened it up and searched until he found...

Jessie, riding Trouble! A perfect name for a trouble-maker's horse.

"Blast that boy!" He watched Jessie steer Trouble uphill. "Blast it, Sin was supposed to have the brat in town by now!"

Was he stealing Trouble, riding over the rim on the long way to town? Ace watched the boy ride toward a rock outcrop he'd not investigated. Boy and horse passed between the boulders and disappeared. Though he watched for a while, they didn't emerge.

He'd seen Jessie ride high on the ridge before. Had the boy found gold on Double Diamond land and now returned to steal it?

A shaft of rage flashed through his body, heating his blood. His cock throbbed as well, caught up in the surge. The boy had damn near laughed in his face every time he gave an order. He'd waggled his ass in those tight pants, bending over to pick up wood for the fire and creating a fire inside Ace as well.

He'd put up with weeks of the same look his family used to sneer at him. The one that said Kenrick Langford, the third son, was

useless. He'd had to put up with his father and older brothers. No bratty child was going to get away with it!

He'd informed Jessie that morning his services were no longer needed. That meant the brat was trespassing on Double Diamond land. By George, he was going to take him down a few pegs, even if he had to use the flat of his hand on the boy's backside!

Ace slid his eyeglass back into its slot and rode just under the ridge until he came to the clump of rocks. A stream ran down, yet no water flowed above. He dismounted and touched the water.

Warm!

He'd heard about hot springs in the area but never guessed one was on his land. How many weeks of aching muscles when he could have relaxed in hot water each night? The boy knew, and withheld the knowledge. With every insolent look, Jessie had thumbed his nose at him. His rage rose a notch higher.

He strode toward the rocks, his horse following. He stopped when he heard a high-pitched noise. A scream? He tilted his head to listen. The horse flicked his ears back. That wasn't—singing? Was the boy a soprano? In ancient days he'd be gelded to keep that voice. Anger returned to Ace. He had half a mind to geld the lad himself.

He hobbled his horse in the shade where there was some grazing. He didn't expect to be long with the boy, but after he punished him for trespassing and everything else, he wanted a long, hot soak.

He followed the voice between boulders higher than his head. A large rock pool with even bigger boulders around it made it look, from below, as if there was nothing but rock. His eyes zoomed onto the round white buttocks as the trespasser frog-kicked across the pool. He winced at the jolt of lust that hit. He turned away, shamed at the way his cock rose.

He turned back when the boy splashed. He opened his mouth to yell and realized the boy had rolled over onto his back.

A pair of lush breasts floated on the surface. Ace swallowed. His cock, denied action for so long, throbbed at the temptation floating in

the pool.

Jessie was a woman! He shuddered a breath of relief. No wonder he lusted. His body knew what he couldn't see. A woman could bind her breasts, but how had she hidden the curves of her waist and hips?

He crouched and lifted her hat and shirt from the pile of neatly folded clothing on a flat rock. He snorted. No boy would stop to fold his clothing. A padded corset of canvas lined with soft cotton explained how she bound her breasts. Wide padding attached like a belt would hide the curve of her waist. Thinking back, she usually wore a thigh-length coat. That would cover her back end.

He looked closer at her corset. How the hell had she done so much work with her ribs bound so tight, and at this altitude? Sheer determination along with one huge dollop of need, throw in some stubborn, and there you have it. A woman fighting to work herself to a stick, just to stay in the saddle. She was far older than fourteen. He was twenty-six, and she was well past marrying age. In England she'd be on the shelf, a dried up, sexless old maid.

He watched Jessie float on her back, eyes closed. She sculled with her hands and moved her legs to keep afloat. He groaned when she frog-kicked, showing him the spot his cock couldn't wait to fill.

Jessie was no dried up stick. She was a curvaceous woman who'd driven him mad for weeks. Ranger must have known she was female. Did the two of them laugh at how they fooled him for so long?

Jessie said Ranger knew her before she went east. If so, why hadn't he taken her on his own ranch? Perhaps he was an old lover. After all, Jessie must have lived with men, working as a cowboy, for years. She'd have had many lovers. She'd pulled a game on him, but he was the winner. Not only did he get three weeks of free, excellent labor out of her, she owed him. She was on his land, having stolen his horse.

He could have her if he wanted. And he wanted her, by George! His cock had had enough teasing. It wanted action!

"Jessie!"

His bellow echoed off the high back wall of the pool. She startled and went under, arms and legs flailing. She came to the surface, coughing and choking. She swam closer, still choking, until her feet reached the bottom and she could stand with her shoulders out of the water. She kept her head down, coughing and wheezing. The water was so clear he saw her shape to her hips. The curves of a full-grown woman.

“Dammit, why the heck did you do that?”

She wiped her eyes and glared up at him. He saw the moment she realized who he was.

“Oh, no!” She pushed herself backward, deeper into the water until only her head protruded. “Go away!”

“Get out of the water.”

“No! I don’t work for you anymore.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, jaw jutting out of the water. The effect was spoiled by her need to keep moving to stay afloat.

“You stole my horse and are trespassing on Double Diamond land. I can do whatever the hell I want with you.”

“If I’m on your land, and so is Trouble, I haven’t stolen anything. You can’t hurt me, you need me too much. I want to stay on the Double D. You’ve only got a couple of weeks of experience. You’ll never get it ready for winter without me.”

She was right, blast it. He needed her. About to curse, he closed his mouth when an idea formed. She could do more for him than ride a horse. He could put her body to good use during the day, and they could share the night. She couldn’t complain when he made that part of the deal. Either she’d agree, or he’d have Frank Chambers throw her in jail. He’d prove to her how much she’d enjoy his attention, first.

“You can stay,” he called out. She sagged in relief at his words, almost sinking in the water. “But I want more than your cowboy skills.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

The water looked inviting. So did the nymph floating in it. With over a foot difference in their heights, the buoyancy would be useful. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. She gulped, her eyes flicking over him. He pulled off his boots. Her face was now pink. He undid his belt and pants and stepped out of them.

“Isn’t it obvious what I want?”

Her eyes stared at the thick cock pointing at her. Her mouth was open as if waiting to take him there. He groaned at the thought. His cock surged, and he glanced down. A drop of pre-cum squeezed out. She licked her lips then looked up. She looked dazed, but eager. She’d had others, but maybe his cock was bigger than some. He knew how to use it to make the ladies happy. She’d be the next.

“You.” She swallowed and took a breath. “You, uh, want to kiss me?”

“I plan to do one hell of a lot more than that.” His cock twitched in agreement. “You coming out or am I coming in?”

She covered her breasts with her hands, making it difficult to tread water. She didn’t come any closer, so he dropped his hat on his clothes and walked into the water. He shifted sideways until he found where the water was cool rather than hot.

He waded toward her. She looked around. High walls rose from the water in every direction but his. If she wanted out, she’d have to get past him. That wasn’t going to happen. She could play the reluctant virgin all she wanted—he could tell she was primed for sex.

“What’s the matter, Jessie? You’ve played with me for weeks. That first morning you aimed your ass at me every time you bent over to pick up a branding iron. Did you really expect I wouldn’t react?”

Her nostrils flared. She stared at the clear water where his hard cock rose in spite of the cool water. She licked her lips.

“Has it been so long since a man pleased you that you’ve forgotten how good it is? I’ll make sure you get your fair share of pleasure. Maybe not the first time because I’m primed to explode, but as soon after as I can.”

She bit her bottom lip. He wanted to nip it and plunge his tongue inside, then follow with his cock. But he waited, water up to his chest, as she came to her decision. Finally, she nodded. Her smile wavered a bit, but it was a smile.

“Kiss me?”

“Damn right!”

She reached out a hand. He caught it and hauled her toward him. She placed her hands on his shoulders, her straight body a few inches from his. A sprinkle of freckles covered her pert nose and cheeks. Eyes almost black with eagerness watched him. He looked down. The cool water firmed her breasts and hardened her nipples even more.

He moved her hands around his neck. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. He paused. Only virgins who hadn't even been kissed before did that. He was a gentleman. Gentlemen never took virgins unless they married them afterward. She tightened her hold, rubbing her lush body against his. Breasts, belly, and pussy.

He groaned. Maybe she didn't know how to kiss because she was used to quick and dirty sex. If so, he'd show her how to reach the stars. She opened her eyes. She frowned.

“You don't want to kiss me?”

“Not like that. Relax your lips and open your mouth a bit.”

She relaxed her muscles. He gently kissed the corner of her mouth. He felt her lips move into a smile. He touched her partly opened mouth with his lips. She responded eagerly, pressing back. He opened his mouth, as did she, so he flicked his tongue.

She gasped and pulled back. She blinked at him for a moment before closing her eyes and going back for more. She wriggled her body and then lifted her legs and grasped him around the waist with them.

His cock rubbed against her pussy. She panted, her eyes wide. He dropped his forehead against hers. She twitched, rubbing herself against his cock before looking up at him.

“I want these.”

He cupped her breasts and flicked the nipples with his thumbs. She trembled. He ran his hands around her ribs to her back and down to her ass. He hummed in appreciation of her soft skin. He clasped his fingers around her cheeks and pulled them gently apart.

“And this.”

Her breasts rubbed against his chest as she fought for air. Perhaps her little gasp meant she’d discovered how chest hair could awaken nipples. He kept his left hand on her ass to hold her snug and brought the right around to the front. He snuck his fingers down her belly and into the soft hairs protecting her pussy. He expected her to be wet from the water, but when he pressed into her pussy his finger met hot, wet flesh.

“And this, definitely.”

She tilted her head to look at him, eyes glazed and lips parted. He pressed her against him with his left hand, swept his lips against her and found her clit with his thumb. He swallowed her gasp, following his finger thrusts in her lower lips with his tongue in her mouth. He circled her clit with his thumb.

“You want more?”

She nodded, gulping air.

He lifted her high enough to capture her nipple between his lips. He rolled it in his mouth as she squirmed against him. A tiny bite made her gasp. He leaned his forehead against hers and whispered.

“I’m going to lie you down by the water and lick your pussy until you scream. Then I’m going to lie on my back while you ride my cock. Again, you’ll scream. When I come inside your pussy, you’ll be too tired to scream, but you’ll want to.”

He held her face with his hands until she nodded agreement. He carried her to shore and set her down on her clothes. She hesitated when he pressed her knees wide to look at her swollen, glistening lips. He shook his head and slid a finger over her clit. She dropped her knees wide, begging for more with a deep groan.

First, he inhaled her scent, clean and fresh. He caught her soft

curls with his lips, nipping them the way Trouble did her hair. He couldn't stand it any longer. He pressed her lips back with his fingers, groaned, and flicked her clit with his tongue.

She shuddered and grabbed his head with both hands. He used his nose on her for a minute before sucking her inner lips into his mouth. He moved to free one hand, sinking his middle finger into her to the knuckle. He added his first finger and curled them forward. She gasped when he stroked the spongy area he found. She accepted his other fingers easily as he kept stroking.

Liquid flowed out of her, proof she wanted him doing this. He changed the stroking to tapping using his thumb on the outside of her pubic bone in a pincer-like movement. She moaned, twitching her hips under him. Close, but not yet.

Keeping his fingers going, he nuzzled her clit. She gasped and shuddered. He reached his free hand to her breast. This time when he tapped her he sucked her right on the clit and pinched her nipple at the same time.

She gave a dainty scream and bucked under him. He smiled and let her down gently, rubbing her pussy until her body turned to jelly. A moment later, she tensed up.

"Open your eyes and look at me," he ordered. That stubborn chin of hers stuck out. He sat up and leaned over her. "Open your eyes, or I'll put you over my knee!"

Immediately he was hit with a glare.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"The way you behaved the last few weeks, I should have put you over my lap ten times a day."

"Then why didn't you?" Still, the glare.

"Because I didn't know why my cock saluted every time you came near."

She put her hand on his, showing what she wanted. He nibbled her breasts, making her moan. She arched her back, demanding more. He liked the way she stood up to him. He wanted a strong, passionate

woman, one who matched him physically and sexually. None of those prissy misses who needed to be coaxed out of their shifts, he wanted one who would demand he satisfy her.

Yet he also wanted to chase her across a meadow, rip off her clothes, wrestle her to her hands and knees, and take her from behind like a stallion would a mare. She would buck and scream, fighting him, making him earn the right to have her.

He wanted an equal. A ranch hand who could take his orders during the day, respectfully suggesting improvements. But when they were man and woman, he wanted a give and take that would drive them both far beyond the placid sex of domesticity. And he wanted to share her with his partners, but not yet.

Wild, passionate, and daring, he wanted Jessie to himself to start. After they'd enjoyed each other for a while, she would move on. Perhaps in the spring, after the bulk of the work was over. He hadn't planned on marrying for a few years, but that one session showed him how much he'd missed having a woman.

When the spring Bride Train arrived, he'd be there, checking out the possibilities for a wife. They needed a wife with the physical strength to keep the Double Diamond's homestead running. She must also be a lady when they had guests, or were in town. She would be meek and modest in public, obeying every order. Only when they were together could she question him, and that, politely.

She wouldn't bring fire to their bed, but she would show the world she knew her place. If a man couldn't keep his wife in line, if others saw she had him by the balls, no one would respect him. He'd seen it in the village, and in Town.

Mistresses could be demanding, but not wives. When one was with one's mistress, it was in a place where every other man was the same. The men enjoyed their mistress acting outrageously in the demi-monde. No one would tolerate a wife behaving that way in Society. They'd be ostracized.

In the village, women who spoke up were beaten. As a child, he

hated to see big men beat their wives to show they were the man of the family. In Society, if a woman didn't obey, she was locked up in the country where she could bear children but not bring her husband shame.

Once a man lost respect, it was gone forever.

He'd done everything he could to earn his father's respect. When he finally realized it would never happen, he walked out. He would do anything to ensure he and the Double Diamond had the respect of the community. For that, he needed a compliant wife, as he could never raise his hand to a woman.

Jessie was so ornery she'd defy her man in public and not give a whit. No man would want a wife with that attitude. But it was brilliant in a temporary affair. He finally lifted his head from her belly, leaving both of them panting.

"You really thought I was a boy?" She trailed her fingers from her breasts to her belly and into her brown curls.

"All I saw was cattle that had to be sorted, branded, and herded to water and feed. One uppity brat was not going to change anything."

"Uppity brat?"

She glowered and tried to shove him away. The weight of one leg kept her in place. She was dainty all over, except for her mouth. He walked his fingers down her belly, pushing her fingers out of the way. Her eyes grew darker and wider. Her nostrils flared when he parted her curls with his fingers. He pressed three fingers, then four into her pussy. He rolled onto his back, bringing her to lie on his chest.

"Want to ride me, cowgirl?"

Chapter Eleven

Jessie still quivered from the explosion Ace brought her with his hands and mouth. He promised she'd scream, and she did. Would it be even better with his cock in her? He settled back and bent his arms, pillowing his head.

She sat up, mouth open in order to breathe. His cock rose like a mast in front of her belly. She grabbed it in both hands, placing one above the other in order to cover most of him. The tip, which resembled a plum, stuck out.

When she first saw Ace, his cock so hard and big, she was frightened. But she remembered the night she snuck out dressed like a male. She followed a group of boisterous young men and ended up at a den of ill repute. She entered with them as if part of the group. A tired-looking woman calling herself Sadie asked her if it was her first time. Eager to see upstairs, she nodded and paid her money. Eyes wide, taking everything in, she followed the swaying backside in front of her.

When Sadie found out Jessie was a girl out on a lark, at first she was angry. But when told she could put her feet up for a few minutes, she relaxed. She told Jessie how to put a sponge soaked in vinegar up inside her to prevent babies. She told her all the ways men could pleasure a woman, if they wanted to. Her last piece of advice was that if she ever found men who wanted to take care of her, especially if they made her pussy wet, she should grab hold and never let go. Jessie gave Sadie most of her money and a hug.

She blushed at the jeers when they came downstairs and Sadie loudly thanked her for a most enjoyable visit. Three men got up from

a table and demanded that she give them just as good a time. Sadie winked and, a man in each arm and one close behind, went back up to her room. After that she spent many nights imagining doing what Sadie did, but for enjoyment rather than money.

She'd wanted to try sex ever since. As the virgin sister of six brothers, she'd never get a chance. Ace didn't know she was a virgin, or an Elliott.

He cocked an eyebrow up at her. "We won't be telling anyone about this. You keep wearing your bindings and all."

She nodded. If her brothers found out, they'd have her head. No, they'd give Ace a choice. Marry her or... No, they wouldn't give him a choice. She'd enjoy herself and not let anyone else know.

She moved her hands up and down his cock, watching his face. He nodded his approval. But she didn't want her hands on him, she wanted him in her. She rose to a crouch, still holding his cock in one hand, and guided the tip into her. He hissed, grimacing.

She sank slowly down, letting her body adjust to him. She was no longer a virgin. Whoopee. What Ace did to her with his mouth was far better than this.

"Is this it?"

He gaped at her. "Pardon me?"

"Your cock is in me. It feels rather nice and full but, so what?"

"So what?" He said it deep and low, as if it was a deadly threat.

"So, what are you going to do to make it feel better for me?" She gulped at his change in expression.

"You've not tried this position before?"

She shook her head.

"First, you lean forward."

She rested her palms on his chest and leaned. She couldn't help the gasp when the change of angle made everything different. Different and so much better. She wriggled and a series of sparks made her quiver.

"Now ride me like a horse but very slowly. Go forward and back,

not up and down.”

He placed his hands on her hips. She settled herself and then followed his lead. He pressed down on her when he pulled her forward, so she ground herself against him. That part of her he’d touched earlier rubbed against him when she moved.

“Mmm, I see what you mean.”

She arched her back a bit, trying it out. That was even better! She played for a while, moving ever faster as the delicious tension she’d felt earlier returned. When she began moving faster, he released her hips and went for her breasts.

“Yes!”

She moved faster, grinding herself hard. He released her breasts, cupping her bottom instead to help her keep her speed. She could no longer think, but moved as she needed, faster and faster, harder and harder.

She knew it was there, but just couldn’t—he slapped her bottom. It made whatever it was snap, and she exploded into a scream. She sat up to better feel his cock sliding in her.

He moaned, grabbed her hips, and moved her up and down so fast her breasts trembled as he slammed up into her. Again and again until her pussy clenched him hard in a final explosion. Suddenly he gasped. He lost his rhythm, bucking into her. When he released her she fell forward onto his chest.

They both fought to breathe for a few minutes. After a few moments she lifted herself off him and stood. His eyes were closed, and he didn’t move. She went into the water and dunked, but he still didn’t move.

When she walked out of the water she knew she was no longer a virgin, but she felt no different. At least she now knew what sex was all about. The whole virginity thing was overrated. She wanted to do it again, but Ace’s snore proved he would be no use. But there were two more hard cocks at the Double Diamond.

Ace continued to sleep as she dressed. She mounted Trouble and

set off. The place between her legs pulsed, wanting more. She might have been a virgin until just a few minutes ago, but living with all those boasting brothers and cousins ensured she knew a few things. She just never had any practice.

Kissing Ace was so different from the discrete pecks on the cheek allowed in Virginia. There, she was a pretty flower. She would bloom, be plucked, then discarded once her seeds had grown and taken fruit.

Not here. Ace seemed to treat her closer to an equal, like Ranger used to do when they lived in Texas. She'd always loved riding this land as a child, long before it was the Double Diamond. If Ace was a bull about her staying, she could always go work with Ranger and Patrick. They could use a good hand. Even when Ben returned, she would be useful. By then, she'd be a full quarter partner in the Bitterroot Ranch.

Never would she be like Louisa MacDougal or the belles of Virginia. Primping and pouting to get what they wanted, more interested in the exact color of a ribbon than the price of a steer on the hoof.

She saw what marriage did to a woman. As far as Jessie was concerned, Sunbird was treated like a slave. The quiet, near-invisible woman said Finan loved her in his way, but that way was not hers.

Louisa was the opposite, taking over whatever space she could with her drama. But soon after they arrived in Texas, Louisa married the wealthy Spanish rancher next to them. He was ten years older. She thought she could treat him as she did her father. That lasted until they signed the register after the wedding. Then he took Louisa to his bedroom. Everyone heard the shrieks as he spanked her. For the rest of the evening, Louisa did what she was told, and when she sat, it was very carefully.

Jessie laughed for days afterward. Then she sobered up. Louisa's father did not get upset when he heard his precious daughter's screams of outrage. He'd turned and silently toasted in approval the man so obviously paddling his daughter. Louisa was passed from her

father to her husband like a prize cow. That wasn't going to happen to Jessie Bonham Elliott!

Her father was dead, so he couldn't order her around. The nasty MacDougals were all in Texas, far to the south. She was old enough to know her own mind, had enough money to take very good care of herself, and was free.

No way would she marry and lose all that!

But she wanted kisses, and more. When Sin massaged her shoulders and back, his fingers had strayed over her bindings. She knew he was aroused by her. She saw enough tight crotches on the Texas males before they headed into town, and listened to the exploits after, hiding in the barn to do so.

A jolt of need hit her between the legs. She leaned forward and rubbed her pussy against the saddle. Her horse, mistaking the motion, sped up.

She leaned far forward, rising in the stirrups, and kicked her heels. Her horse shifted into a smooth gallop. She exulted in the sensations. Her pussy, her breasts, and the anticipation of more. Too bad Ace wanted her to hide her sex.

Maybe in a couple of days Ace would see she needed more. Sin made her tingle in a quite different way. Different, but very, very nice.

She slowed long before coming into the yard. She dismounted and walked her horse for a while, thinking of her plan. Sin walked out of the springhouse while she thought. He carried a bucket in his hand. He nodded and went into the barn. She followed him, dread and anticipation churning through her. How could she hide what she wanted?

* * * *

Jessie woke surrounded by cats, as she had every morning for the past three weeks.

“You’re sweet, but I’d hoped to wake up with Ace,” she grumbled to the marmalade curled at her feet. “I want to keep this from my brothers, not from Sin and Henry!”

She got up carefully so as not to disturb the cats, and dressed. She didn’t mind wearing the corset, since it held her from bouncing, but the waist belt and coat to hide her shape were a dang nuisance.

Maybe Ace told them about her after she went to bed?

Her breasts swelled under her corset when she entered the cabin. Ace stood by the bed as if he’d just gotten up. He stretched, his cock standing out like it had the day before. Her pussy twinged, aching for him. When he noticed her, he stared at her chest and then down. His cock jumped, but he turned away to dress.

She dropped her head to hide the heat covering her face. Of course he wouldn’t give her a morning hug and kiss like she remembered her father and mother doing. This wasn’t love, just sex. He was her first lover, so she’d expected an eager reaction. But she was just another woman to him.

Wasn’t that what she wanted? Good sex without the ownership of marriage? She pressed her fist between her breasts. Why did it hurt so much to be treated this way?

She turned at the soft curse behind her. Sin, shirtless, stirred porridge. He nodded politely, as if nothing had changed. Ace hadn’t told them she was female, much less what they’d done at the hot spring.

The first rays of the sun lit up Sin’s blond chest hair. Now that she knew what a man’s chest felt like, she wanted to rub her breasts against those curls. She watched his long, strong fingers stir the porridge.

Ace demanded she be his equal, whether riding a horse or his cock. She liked knowing he respected her strength.

Sin’s gentle but strong hands had soothed her cramped shoulder muscles. What would they feel like on the rest of her body?

Sin continued staring at her. His nostrils flared, and her pussy

responded. She swallowed. His unusual eyes, light blue with a dark gray ring, seemed to bore into her. She was new at sex, but she was sure he was sending a message. Did he want his cock deep in her, pounding hard? What if she told him to pull her pants down, bend her over the table, spread her legs, and take her from behind?

“Jessie, I hear you’re staying on for a bit,” said Henry as he came in the door. As always, he had a smile for her. He hefted a pail of water onto the table. “I wasn’t sure if you would still do breakfast, so I started. Ace says you might be able to help us until the steers are gone.”

She bit her lip and nodded. Henry’s smile faded when he looked into Sin’s pot.

“Bloody hell! Can’t I trust you to stir the porridge without burning it? Give me that spurtle.” Henry lifted the pot from the stove and pushed Sin aside with his hip. He took the wooden porridge stick and stirred vigorously, muttering about blithering idiots.

Jessie looked over, but Ace wouldn’t meet her eye. Sin stomped outside, and Henry fussed like a hen over breakfast. She clenched her jaw. Having sex meant she was a woman, but Sin and Henry still treated her like a boy. Ace knew she was female but ignored her like it was a dirty secret.

If Ace wouldn’t let anyone know they’d had sex, he and his attitude could go hang. They all could go hang!

“You want porridge, Jessie?” Henry stirred some more. “It’s not too far gone. With a bit of honey and some dried currants, it won’t be too bad.”

Jessie’s stomach curdled at the thought. She pressed her hand against her belly.

“Thanks, but I’m still full from last night,” she said. She gave Henry the best smile she could manage. She looked at Ace, but he still had his back to her. “Might as well get started before it gets too hot.” She managed to get outside before tears pricked at her eyelashes. “Damn the man!”

“You might want to keep your voice down if you’re talking about Ace,” said Sin, standing at the washbasin. He picked up the razor and strop. “I don’t know what happened yesterday, but he’s been as angry as a porcupine with a swarm of bees up his butt.”

In spite of herself, Jessie snorted a laugh at Sin’s feeble effort to use local language. “That would be bear.”

“What would be bare?”

His eyes flashed down her body before meeting her own again. A jolt of heat made it hard to breathe. She tried to inhale, but the darn corset stopped her.

“As angry as a bear,” she corrected. “Porcupines don’t eat honey.”

Sin held the straight razor an inch from his cheek. “I knew that. You came storming out there like you had a big mad on and I wanted to see if you were awake.”

“I’m awake,” she growled. Suddenly fed up with men, she turned toward the barn. “I’ve got work to do.”

Nothing had changed. She’d hoped Ace would tell his partners that she was a woman last night, but no. He hadn’t hinted for her to stay with him when it got dark, either. So she spent another night on a pallet with cats. And this morning, ignoring her...!

She mounted Trouble and rode out. She’d check the steers first, then circle up behind. She’d seen a flat outcrop which might serve as a good watching place. She wanted to check it out to see if whoever left cigarette makings had spent any time there as well. It wasn’t likely her brothers were spying on her. Was it Smythe’s hired guns, wanting to cause trouble? Or someone else?

Chapter Twelve

“Why’d Jessie take off in such a hurry?” Henry scooped lumpy porridge into three bowls. He shoved the one with the most burned bits in front of Sin, daring him to complain, and turned to Ace. “You did promise him a wage to stay on?”

“Jessie’s got reasons for staying,” replied Ace. He scooped a spoonful out of his bowl, grimaced, and shoved it in his mouth.

Sin glowered at the food in front of him. A quick look at Henry made him change his mind about complaining. He’d been thinking of making love with Jessie instead of concentrating on the pot. After he forced down the first spoonful, followed by strong black coffee, the rest followed more easily. He would need a full belly to work all day.

He was sure when Jessie returned to the barn the previous afternoon she was no longer innocent, but Ace said nothing. She kept shooting looks at Ace, especially as it got dark. When Ace said he needed sleep, Jessie had almost stomped her way to the barn.

The same thing happened this morning. She’d stared at Ace’s cock as if she wanted to suck him deep. Sin had a damn difficult time stopping himself from offering his own if Ace was too stupid to take her up on it. Especially when she looked at him as if wondering if he’d do a better job than Ace.

Damn right he would!

Ace wouldn’t have touched her if he thought she was a virgin. Therefore, he would not have been as careful of her, thinking she’d had sex numerous times before. Whatever they’d done, Jessie wasn’t complaining. But she certainly looked like she could use more.

Now that Ace had removed the obstacle of virginity, if she wanted

him, he was not going to hold back. Only, he'd treat her as the sweet, shy virgin that he knew was hiding underneath all that swagger.

Jessie might think she was tough as nails and twice as strong, but he knew otherwise. Yes, she was strong and tough and entirely capable of ram-rodding the Double Diamond. But she was also a woman. Somewhere in all those years since her mother died, she'd lost what it meant. From what Ranger said, Jessie looked on marriage and family as a curse foisted on women by God and man's laws.

He wanted to show her that a man and a woman could share things she'd never imagined. Knowing she was entirely capable of caring for herself didn't change his need to protect her. He wanted to show her how a man cherishes a strong woman.

"We'll have to do something about the snakes first," said Ace.

Sin, startled from his plans, tried to remember what Ace was talking about.

"That ledge is a good lookout point," said Henry. "You can see the whole valley from there."

"I wouldn't want to have to choose between jumping twenty feet off a cliff or taking the risk of being bit by a couple of rattlers," said Ace.

"That's one good thing about Ireland," said Henry. "No snakes." He laughed. "Where's St. Patrick when you need him?"

"Wish my mother had visited Ireland instead of Scotland," muttered Sin. "I hate snakes."

"You do?" Henry set both elbows on the table and leaned over. "We should know if you're going to go crazy if you see one. That could get us killed, as well as you."

Sin stared at his bowl. "An adder almost killed me. I'm over it."

"That why the bull snake in the barn gives you the willies?" asked Henry. He pushed the small jar of honey toward Sin as if bribing him for details.

Though his stomach clenched, Sin dribbled a tiny spoonful of honey over what was left of his breakfast. Henry was right. Fear on

his part would cause problems. He scooped the last of the burned porridge bits into his mouth and swallowed. He followed it with the last of his coffee.

“I was in Scotland when I was about six and found a beautiful snake. As usual, I was on my own. No one mentioned adders, or that they were poisonous. Luckily the gamekeeper came along. He showed me how to use a forked stick to hold a snake down and flick it away.”

Sin shuddered in memory. The gamekeeper had been blunt as to what happened to boys who didn’t know the land they walked in. For the next few weeks, while his mother slept with various men at the house party, Sin spent most of his time with the man. He learned about fishing, hunting and the like. He forgot about it until he saw the huge diamond-pattern bull snake slither under the barn.

They all thought it was a rattler, but Simon Elliott was with them. After explaining it was harmless, he said they needed the snake to keep rats and all from the barn. It was a constrictor, so no fangs, but the bloody thing was damn near as long as Sin was tall!

It hadn’t bothered Jessie one whit when she saw it the first time. He still quietly fixed all the holes in her sleeping area. He told himself he didn’t want her stumbling on the thing while it searched for prey. But he couldn’t sleep if the bloody thing could come anywhere near her.

He hadn’t seen any rattlers yet. Simon said he should be happy that rattlesnakes here only grew to about four-and-a-half feet. Of course, there were other, nonpoisonous, snakes around. Even garter snakes made him shudder. But snakes were part of this life, and he’d learn to deal with them. Eventually.

The reason he slept in the loft, no matter how hot, was because he figured snakes couldn’t climb ladders. It wouldn’t be soon enough until they lived in a snug, reptile-proof home.

“Someone should check out that ledge,” said Ace. He looked directly at Sin. “There’s a narrow path up to the flat rock where I saw a couple rattlers sunning themselves. You want to handle it?”

Sin gritted his teeth and nodded. No one would be there to watch, so he could take as much time as he needed. He'd face his fear and get past it. No snake was going to dictate the boundaries of his life.

"Good man," said Henry. He slapped him on the back. Sin rubbed his stomach, wishing he hadn't eaten after all.

When Sin headed out he wore sturdy boots and his thickest pants. He might regret it later if it heated up, but if he caught a rattler's fang, he wanted as much as possible between the poison and his body. He carried a forked stick across his lap, one he kept handy in the barn.

He forced his fear deep inside and rode toward the ridge. By now, the path might have a couple of the nasty, slithering things lying in wait for him. But he was a man, not a boy. He'd look those snakes in the eyes until he could do it without cold sweat forming.

The cry of a hunting golden eagle reminded him there were other dangers along the way. He rolled his stiff shoulders back and let his horse find its way over the rocky, shrub-strewn hillside. He came around the final outcrop and saw a white horse.

He dismounted and walked forward, tugging his own behind him. When it heard Trouble's nicker it came easily. Sin, hands shaking, hobbled it next to Jessie's horse.

He stood and looked uphill. There was the narrow path. It disappeared around the far side of a rocky outcrop. If Jessie was up there, she would be on the ledge. He took his stick and walked around the rocky outcrop until the ledge was above him.

He backed up as far as he could, but the ledge was too high and deep for him to see if anyone lay on it. After all the work she'd done, he wouldn't be surprised if she fell asleep in the sun. She certainly earned it.

"Jessie?"

He couldn't call too loudly in case she was asleep. If a snake was nearby, and his voice made her jump, she'd be in trouble. Since she didn't answer, he'd have to go up the path.

He went back around and looked up. The path curved to the right,

going from shade to sun. On his right was the wall, with broken rock and crevices near his feet. Perfect for snakes.

Forked staff in his left hand, he moved forward step by slow step, dreading what he'd find around the corner. The gap between the path and the ground to his left grew with each step. Ahead, he could see the light of the sun. He pressed his right hand against the rock at his shoulder and leaned his head around the corner. He pulled back immediately.

"Bloody hell," he whispered.

He shivered, cold sweat forming under his arms. He took a half step, tensed his muscles, and leaned around the corner again. He forced himself to stare at the diamond patterns on the snakes. The one under the barn was closer to yellow. These had a dark brown pattern.

It seemed like dozens with the first glance, but it was only two.

Only. Two.

He eased his way around the corner. They were four and six feet ahead of him, sunning themselves. He looked to his left. He was about ten feet above ground here. Enough to be a problem if he jumped and didn't land right, but better than a snakebite.

Was Jessie around the far corner?

"Jessie?"

He squeaked the word, barely a whisper. He locked the fear inside. His woman might be on the other side of those snakes. Caught. When the sun came around the snakes would follow up. Uphill. The ledge protruded over his head with at least two feet to spare. Jessie might be right above him.

He took a deep breath, held it, and slowly released. Normally he would close his eyes to do it, but no way would he trust those serpents not to attack immediately. He took a step closer, staff ready. The snakes curled up and faced him, tails high. Their tips vibrated, a hollow rattle that sounded like his death knell.

He stepped once more. The closest one opened its mouth in a macabre smile. He thought of Jessie on the other side and stabbed

with the staff. He caught its head between the two wooden points. He swept it sideways like a broom. It flew off the path.

The other reared higher.

He wiped his palms on his shirt, one at a time, and took another step. He stabbed again. This time he caught the snake farther back. It curled around and attacked the staff but it flew off the path before it could strike.

He jammed the staff between his feet, clasped both hands around the wood and shook for a moment.

Damn, he'd done it!

He pulled his shirt tail out and wiped cold sweat off his face.

"Jessie?"

"Who's that?" She sounded angry rather than fearful.

"It's Sin. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right," she complained. "That friend of yours is an ass!"

"Forget about Ace, honey. Are there any snakes around you?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I just got two bloody big rattlers off the path in front of me."

"Oh." He heard the shuffle of feet on rock. "Sin?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Did you say two, or four?"

"There were two in front of me, but they're gone now."

"Um, I see another two, and there might be a tail curving around the corner."

Sin jammed his teeth together so tight his jaw ached.

"Don't move. I'm going to look from this end."

He moved another three feet, just until the curve. He set his staff with his left hand to balance and leaned forward. He swallowed though his mouth was dry. Jessie was above him, and could see two snakes from her angle. There were at least four here. Unlike the first ones, they were too close together for him to take care of individually.

The only way he could think of getting rid of them was to toss round rocks above them, so they'd roll down and scare the snakes. They'd slither toward him, of course. He pulled himself back around the corner and straightened. His heart couldn't decide whether to stop dead or pound so hard his chest would explode. But he would keep Jessie safe. He'd do anything for that.

"How many, Sin?"

"Four."

"Plus my two?"

"I think so." He croaked the word.

"Oh." Sin waited as she thought. "They'll go away when the sun gets hot. I can wait."

Sin scrunched up his face. "Bad news, sweetheart. The sun might drive them toward you."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

"I'm bloody well not!"

He froze after the stupid yell. He leaned forward. Yes, the snakes were coiled, flicking their tongues in his direction. He waited for Jessie to think it out. She knew the danger and had guts. He would help her, but not take over.

"I'll climb down the ledge, then."

A vision of her splattered on the rocks hit him.

"You sit your sweet little ass down and bloody well wait for me to walk around!"

The snakes turned and began shaking their tails at his bellow. They flicked their tongues as if already tasting him. The sight and sound would haunt his nightmares for weeks.

"Charles bloody Statham, I can take care of myself!"

The snakes swiveled their heads uphill again. He drew a deep breath, then let it out.

"I know you can, sweetheart," he said gently. "But I'm going to walk around under you. Promise you'll wait until I get there." Silence. "Jessie? Promise me."

“I promise I’ll wait,” she grumbled.

Sin shuffled down the path as if the snakes were slithering after him. He raced around the rock on rubbery legs and looked up. Jessie sat on the ledge swinging her feet as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

In spite of the way his heart threatened to burst, he grinned. This was a woman! She may be scared as all get-out, but she wouldn’t let it show. Blood pounded into his cock. The urge to make her his, to prove he was worth her, throbbed through him.

She was no longer a virgin. There was nothing to stop him. He could show her how a man pampers a woman he loves.

The drop was about sixteen feet. He kicked away the rocks that had split off over the years, clearing a safe landing area. His raised arms would be at least seven feet above ground. If Jessie could hang off the edge, she would be five feet closer. It left about four feet for her to fall. At a hundred pounds, plus gravity, he should be able to catch her safely. If necessary he’d make sure she landed on him.

Jessie glared down at him. She thrust out her jaw and darn near growled. “You called me sweetheart!”

He nodded, grinning as hard as she was glaring.

“Why?”

“Because I think you taste as sweet as honey. And I’m going to find out, Jessie-girl. We’re going to get better acquainted as soon as I touch you.”

“Dammit, did Ace tell you?” She hauled herself to her feet. “I’m going to kick his ass into next week! Making me wear all this when he already told you I wasn’t a boy.”

Sin shook his head, marveling at her. She stamped her foot like a ferocious pixie. He couldn’t wait to wind that passion up until she released it in one huge orgasm.

“Sweetheart, I figured that out the day you started at the Double Diamond.”

“How could you tell? I kept my voice low and wore this damned belt and corset.”

She pulled up her shirt and unwound a thick roll of fabric. He was so busy hoping to see her breasts that it hit him in the face. He managed to catch her long coat, which she had been sitting on.

“You can work like a cowboy all day, but you’re all woman to me.”

“Now I won’t have to wear this contraption anymore.” She put her hands to her neck and started undoing her buttons.

“Whoa, let’s get you down from that ledge before you take any more clothes off. We don’t want any part of you to get scraped on the rock.”

She looked down, biting her lip. She kicked the edge of the ledge with the toe of her boot. Bits of rock rained down on Sin.

“I won’t be able to hold on to the ledge for very long without it cracking off,” she said.

“I know. I’m going to catch you.”

She scrunched her nose and frowned. “No,” she finally said, shaking her head. “I’ll wait until the snakes are gone.”

He shook his head back at her. “No, Jess. Trust me to catch you.” He held out his arms, low with palms up, like a bishop talking to God.

She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned over. He could see her calculating the distance and thinking about what could happen.

“Can you trust me to catch you, sweetheart?”

She shrugged. Her face looked like the stone behind her. White and hard.

“You’re not used to trusting someone to take care of you.”

Her lower lip trembled. She shook her head.

“You’re a strong woman, but everyone needs someone to hug them now and then. Give me your trust. I would never let anything hurt you.”

She looked over her shoulder. Her eyes widened. She gulped and turned back. “I don’t think I have a choice,” she whispered. “They’re coming closer.”

“Lie on your stomach and let your legs dangle. I’ll be underneath. Hold on as long as you can. When you’re ready to let go, tell me.”

She nodded, her chin trembling. She sat on the edge and then rolled onto her stomach. She inched backwards, her bottom wiggling. He stood underneath, wishing her feet weren’t so far above him. He tossed his hat aside to see better. She wiggled further, pointing her toes as if that would make a difference. She bent her arms and laid her palms flat on the ledge, fingers pointing away.

He wanted to tell her not to struggle when she fell, as it would make it so much harder to catch her. But that would mean she’d have to stop a natural instinct. She could only do it if she trusted him completely. He braced himself for a foot in his mouth, or worse.

“I think this is about as far as I can move,” she said.

“I’m ready, sweetheart.”

She crossed her ankles. He heard her panting. Her biceps flexed. She shoved up and out. She fell backwards, her knees slightly bent.

It seemed to take forever. She held her hands across her chest and crossed her ankles. She kept herself loose, flexing as his arms caught under her shoulders and thighs. He let his arms drop to slow her dead weight and pulled her in. He fell to his knees, cradling her against him. She opened her eyes and smiled.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She scrambled out of his arms, landing on her hands and knees. He let her go, but stayed near. She panted, trying to draw air into her lungs. She yanked at her shirt, trying to pull it over her head. He helped her and then sat back. She fumbled with the strings of her corset, her fingers shaking.

“You want that off now?”

She turned to him, nodding as she tried to inhale. Though his hands also shook, it was in desire now. She’d knotted the laces so he cut them with his knife. Her breasts burst free as she hauled air deep into her lungs. She leaned forward, her smooth back to him. Angry red marks showed where the corset had chafed her soft flesh. He

fisted his hands so he wouldn't touch. To keep his brain from thinking about what he wanted to do, he looked at her back.

He growled in rage when he realized someone had whipped her. The thin white scars, laid next to each other, were unmistakable. He'd seen them on other backs. Strong, male ones, not those of a petite female. When Ace saw what someone had done to Jessie, he'd go berserk.

Her breathing slowed. He didn't move. She sat back on her heels. He wanted to run his hands through her hair, if he couldn't touch her breasts.

She looked at him over her shoulder. Gone was the fear he'd seen earlier. He gulped. She rose on her knees and moved around to face him. She held herself erect, proudly displaying her upper body to him.

"Oh, Lord," he groaned.

Perfect breasts with coral nipples. Small bruises and a few old scars along with the corset marks marred her white skin. But what took his breath away was the way her breasts quivered as she took deep, calm breaths. He crossed his arms over his chest to keep from touching them.

"You called me 'sweetheart.' More than once."

He nodded. She rolled her shoulders. He couldn't help but watch as her breasts moved as well. They fascinated him. How far would his mouth cover her nipple? Did she like the sharp nip followed by a sensual laving?

"What do you mean about me being sweet?"

"Did Ace taste you between your legs?" He almost croaked the words.

Her face, and her breasts, flushed pink.

"You liked it, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Ace doesn't know you were a virgin."

She gave a tiny shrug, but her breasts moved like magic. "I let him think that. He wouldn't have done it otherwise."

“And you wanted him.”

“I wanted to know about sex. Now I do.” She pouted. “Since I’m not a virgin, my brothers won’t scare off any men I want.”

“You really think what Ace showed you was everything you need to know about sex?”

“He licked me, and he showed me how to ride him. Then he fell asleep. And he hasn’t even looked at me since!”

“Ah, Jessie.”

Sin scooped Jessie into his arms. He sat on the hard rock, soft breasts snug against his shirt. “There’s so much more.” He trailed his fingers over her back. She twitched when he found special spots. He memorized them for later.

Though Ace didn’t know it, he’d taken the virginity of a social equal. He’d compromised her. Ace was a gentleman, and must marry her. Though Trace insisted she was to stay a virgin until after the wedding, it was too late to close the barn doors. The horse had bolted, kicked up her heels, and demanded service.

She inhaled, nipples tightening. His cock throbbed harder as her breasts swelled. An innocent, compromised by the ramrod of the Double Diamond. A man who wanted a large family and deep roots. A friend closer than a brother with whom Sin and Henry had shared many an eager woman.

Sin wanted to show Jessie a gentle seduction.

“Ace fell asleep because he’s been working day and night for months, Jess. After sex, especially a good orgasm when a man’s gone without for a long time, he often falls asleep.” He brushed his lips over her forehead. “Ace doesn’t know who you are, does he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Jessamine Bonham Elliot.”

She blanched, then shrugged and looked away.

“The only sister of six great, big Elliots and their three killer cousins.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m an adult with my own money,” she said.

The pout belied her insistence on being called an adult. “They can’t make me do anything,” she muttered.

“No, they can’t,” he agreed.

He wouldn’t mention what they might do to Ace, however. The woman squirming in his arms had discovered sex. Like good food, now that she knew about it, she was not going to do without. He would be damned if someone other than the Double Diamond provided it. But he wanted to show her a different side to loving.

“Let me show you a few things Ace missed.”

Her nipples crinkled immediately. He licked a finger and, slowly so she could object if she wanted to, touched one. She arched her back. He groaned and dropped his mouth to hers. Just before touching, he stopped and met her eyes. She closed her own and opened her lips.

He nibbled her bottom lip. She opened for him. He slid his tongue between her bottom teeth and lip. She moaned at his touch on the soft, extra-sensitive flesh. He backed away and let her lead. She started hesitantly, kissing the corners of his mouth.

He placed his hand on her breast, catching her nipple between his fingers. Her groan and the exquisite touch of her flesh on his palm almost made him explode. He dropped his forehead against hers.

“Not like this,” he said. “I want you where I can kiss and suck and nibble every part of you.”

“You promise? You’re not going to tease and leave me all twitchy?”

He leaned back and laughed at her demand.

“I’ll tease, but I won’t leave you wanting. That’s a promise, no matter what.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jessie let Sin help her put her shirt on. She mounted Trouble and the two of them set off. Two steps proved that trotting was not a good idea without her corset, but she couldn't wear it again until she bought new ribbons. She was in a hurry to get home, so she held her breasts up with her left hand while holding her reins with her right.

"If you ride in front of me I can hold onto those for you," joked Sin.

"Promises, promises!"

She leaned far forward, rising in the stirrups, and kicked her heels. Her horse shifted into a smooth gallop. Cool air blew into the gap between her throat and shirt. She exulted in the sensations. Her pussy, her breasts, and the anticipation of more. She soon slowed, not wanting to chance Trouble getting hurt. She let the horse walk, knowing Sin would catch up to her.

When she worked on the MacDougal ranch, she was usually too tired to touch herself, but she'd discovered a few things that pleased her while in Virginia. She knew about sex, just hadn't had any practice until yesterday. What Ace did had made her want more. Sin's touch was nothing like Ace's. He looked at her as if he wanted to lick her from nose to toes and everywhere in between. Henry was fun and made her laugh. Was she like Beth Elliott and Amelia MacDougal, wanting three men?

If Trace knew she was in Tanner's Ford, he'd make sure no man touched her. No more kisses to make her wet. From what she remembered of her oldest brother, he acted like he was her pa. He'd force her to marry if he found out what she'd done with Ace. He

might even order her to put on a dress and stay in the house!

If so, she'd leave. She'd left her money in the bank in Virginia, just in case. She'd hidden some gold in the Double Diamond barn as well. She'd take it and head to California, maybe. No Elliotts, MacDougals, or Double Diamonds either!

She and Trouble walked into the yard, Sin following twenty feet behind. He followed her into the barn.

A flush ran up her body when Sin's slow, steady steps came up behind her. She felt his heat at her back. He slid his hands around her waist and pulled her against his front. Without her binding, her nipples rose and brushed against the cotton. His cock pressed into her lower back. His lips brushed against her bent neck, making her shiver.

"You want me, Jessie Elliott?"

His teeth grazed along the side of her neck. Her breasts swelled, demanding attention. She tilted her head back to encourage him. His fingers slid, ever so slowly, up her ribcage. Just under her breasts he released her. She moaned in complaint until she realized he was after her buttons.

He completed the job and pulled her shirt out of her pants. He pulled it off her shoulders and tossed it away. Her breath caught when his hands finally held her breasts. He groaned in her ear. She arched into his hands. Her pussy swelled, demanding equal attention.

Sin trailed one hand down her belly to her belt. He undid it, then her buttons. She held her breath when he eased his fingers into her drawers, past her curls and into her pussy. She caught his hand with her thighs, holding him there.

"If you want me to move my fingers, you have to give me some room," he whispered.

"More," she moaned. She widened her stance and wiggled to help him lower her pants. He played with her left breast and pulsed between her swollen, wet lips.

"Let's see if I can find it," he whispered.

He rubbed the heel of his hand against her mound. She gasped

when he hit something wonderful.

“There’s your clit.”

He played with it until she was ready to scream. She didn’t care what happened after, she wanted him to do something now! She whimpered when he pulled his hand out.

“Don’t turn around,” he whispered hoarsely.

She heard rustling, then he turned her to face him. Once more his lips descended on hers. She knew what to do now. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed against his bare chest. He met her tongue thrust for thrust before pulling back, panting. He lifted her and laid her on his shirt on a pile of hay.

She squeaked when he lifted her feet, tied together at her ankles by her pants, over her head. When his tongue touched her pussy she bent her knees to give him more space to move. He slid his tongue between her wet lips, showing her whatever Ace did was nothing compared to this.

He pressed his fingers in her, his thumb against her clit. She clenched him, wanting more. He dropped his head again and caught her clit with his lips.

The band of tension wrapping around her tightened. Nothing existed but his tongue and his fingers, her pussy and clit.

“Come for me, Jessie,” he ordered. “Let loose and scream if you need to.”

She whipped her head back and forth, wanting more. He put his lips back on her pussy. She groaned in encouragement, but it wasn’t enough. She gasped, fighting for breath.

He trailed a finger down to her bottom. He scratched at her hole. She bucked, the sensation sending a line of fire through her. He did it again while pinching her clit with his lips and running his fingers inside her. She quivered. When he pressed into her back hole, she exploded. She bucked against him, squeezing her thighs around his head, holding him close as he continued.

Finally, she slumped, gasping for air. He kissed her thigh, wet

kisses trailing. She opened her eyes. He nosed her curls and flicked her pussy with his tongue. Again, she quivered. His eyes smiled at her knowingly.

“My turn.”

He took his time removing her boots and pants. She sat up to watch him undress. His cock seemed longer than Ace’s, perhaps because his blond curls let her see his entire length. He bent over and kissed her, massaging her breast with his hand. After her explosions, she was primed for more.

“I want you in me,” she demanded.

“I’m the boss,” he replied.

He aimed his cock at her, but rubbed it across her folds rather than inside. It slipped deliciously over her, back and forth, before settling at her opening. She smiled when he entered her, but he stopped after an inch. She lay on her back as he pulsed forward, an inch at a time, stretching her. He watched her the whole time. When his thighs rested against her bottom, his fuzzy balls dangling and tickling her, he leaned over.

Though she wriggled, he kept his hips still while he grazed his teeth over her nipples. He suckled her breasts, pressing her nipple against the roof of his mouth. He rubbed his thumb above where his cock entered her. She hissed and arched her back.

He smiled like a lazy cat and kept working, rubbing around and around but never touching her in the right spot again. She twisted her hips, trying to make his fingers hit the right spot.

“Dammit, Sin, you know what I want!”

He chuckled. “That’s a long way from ‘please.’”

She glared, her eyes glistening. “I don’t beg.”

“You will,” he replied smugly.

Though she fought for what seemed like hours, he kept tantalizing her. Finally, she could take it no longer. The tension in every part of her tightened so that she thought she’d explode if he didn’t do something.

“Please, Sin!”

He immediately vibrated his thumb over her clit and moved his cock in and out. Faster and faster he went. He released her clit in order to hold onto her hips, slamming her onto him as he thrust forward.

So deep, so strong. She reached down and played with her clit and one nipple. He stared into her eyes, grimacing as if in pain. He changed angle, hitting something new, and she exploded.

She heard a distant scream as he pumped into her, grunting. Again and again he hit deep until he roared and lost rhythm. She arched her back, angling her pussy so he rubbed against the front of her. It set off another, milder burst. She clenched him hard until he finally collapsed, trembling arms barely keeping him from crushing her.

They panted for a while as the world settled around them once more.

He lifted his head, still gasping for breath, and met her eyes. A piratical grin lit his face.

“That better than Ace’s first time?”

“Oh, yes,” she murmured.

“He’s off his game lately. Give him a day to recover, and he’ll set you quivering.”

Sin teased her clit with his finger. More tingles made her shiver.

“Damn if you don’t want more,” he said with a laugh.

She sighed when he slipped out. “You promised me a bed. How long before you can do that again?”

He groaned. “Maybe tonight.”

She stretched, power surging through her.

“Where do you think Henry is?”

Sin barked a laugh. “I expect he’s making dinner.”

“Do you think he might be interested in learning I’m not a boy?”

Sin responded by sweeping her into his arms. “Why don’t we find out?” He stopped, frowning. “You’re not sore?” She shook her head. Even if she was, she knew the perfect place to soak out aches and

pains.

Sin carried her out of the barn and across the yard. The cabin door was open. She saw Henry inside, working at the table. Sin stopped.

“Henry! Get your ass out here!”

Henry rushed out the door, shotgun ready. He saw them and stopped so fast he had to grab the pole supporting the overhang to keep upright. His jaw dropped, along with the barrel of the rifle.

“Where the hell did she come from?”

“Henry Bennett, meet Jessamine Bonham Elliott.”

Jessie smiled and waved. Henry crooked up the corner of his mouth but never met her eyes.

“I promised Jessie she’d be satisfied. Think you can help?”

Henry shook himself. “Damn right!” One more look and he rushed into the cabin.

“He’s primed to blow, Jessie, so don’t expect much the first time. But we’ll work together to make sure you’re very happy.”

The door was so narrow Sin had to set her on her feet to get through. Henry, caught smoothing the bed, flashed her a smile. Seeing his eyes glaze, she walked forward. For the first time ever, she felt powerful as a woman. She moved slowly, keeping her shoulders back and swaying her hips.

“Damn, you make a fine woman,” he murmured.

He waited until she stopped, her nipples grazing his shirt. He wasn’t quite a foot taller, so she could easily reach his shoulders. She looked up at him and flicked open the top three buttons of his shirt.

“You want me to do this slowly,” she asked, “or do you want to shuck ’em fast?”

He stepped back and ripped his shirt off. Staring intently at her, he undid his belt and pants, and pushed them down. His cock aimed slightly to her right. Ace and Sin had touched her. She wanted to be the one to touch Henry.

“Everything off,” she said, staring at his bobbing cock. “I want to touch you all over.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

He dropped his butt to the floor, yanking on his boots before Sin pointed out he had to undo them first. She laughed at his eagerness and held out her arms. He tossed his pants aside and, arms wide, strode forward. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She rested her forehead on his chin. His cock pressed against her belly. His bare chest warmed her nipples.

“I’m not going to last long, Jessie.”

“Good,” she said.

She looked up at Henry. He panted, his nostrils wide. She placed her hands on his chest and pressed gently. He frowned but let her break his grip. She backed away a step, and he dropped his hands to his sides. She kissed his chest and then a nipple.

“Don’t move,” she said.

He nodded, jerking his head. She slid her hands down his chest to his belly. He hissed as he inhaled. She curled her hand around his cock. It jumped and he groaned. She winked and, nibbling all the way, knelt in front of him.

“Oh, God, you’re not going to—”

She swirled her tongue around the tip of his cock, tasting his salty musk.

“Oh, Jesus!”

She caught him in both hands and pressed him into her mouth. He tentatively touched her hair. When she didn’t pull away, he rested his hands on her head.

When she leaned forward, her sensitive breasts brushed against the hair on his legs. She shivered at the sensation. She loved the power she held over him, making him quiver, as Sin had made her.

She bobbed her head, letting her teeth lightly scrape his cock. He jerked. She stopped and looked up. He nodded and pressed her head toward him again. His mouth was open, gasping for air. She snuggled closer and took him as deep as she could, then backed away. Holding his cock in her fist, she sucked a testicle into her mouth. She rolled it

gently with her tongue for a moment before releasing it.

Gently squeezing his balls, she checked out his cock. Fluid ran from the tip. She licked it, again swirling her tongue. His balls hardened in her hand. He shifted his hips, forward and back.

“Jessie, I’m going to come,” he gasped. “You don’t want—”

Yes, she did. She wanted to taste the victory of making this kind man explode from her touch. She used a trick Sadie the whore told her about. She held one fist around his cock to keep him from going too far inside her mouth. She sucked him deep and pulled his balls. He growled and pushed her head against him. With both fists in her hair, he pumped his explosion into her mouth.

She kept only the bulbous head in her mouth, enough to catch his essence. She tasted power in the salty drops. He gasped, twitching, and released his tight hold on her hair. She held his cock lovingly and licked him from base to tip. He was still rigid, but nowhere near as hard or big as before.

When she was ready, she leaned back on her heels and looked up. Henry brushed her cheek with his palm.

“Come here,” he said.

He leaned down and helped her stand. She hadn’t seen that look in his eyes before, demanding and possessive, as if she’d done something that made her belong to him. He smiled at her gently and shook his head.

“You aren’t leaving the Double Diamond anytime soon.” Henry closed his eyes, inhaled, and dropped his head back. “I feel like I could take on a herd of longhorns and wrestle them to the ground all by myself.” He looked down at her and winked. “But there’s something else we have to do first, isn’t there, Sin?”

Another set of warm hands slid around and captured her breasts. Sin pressed his chest against her back. His cock, no longer soft, rested above her bottom.

“We are going to make sure this lady wants to stick around for a while,” said Sin.

Henry bent his head, opening his lips. She did the same, shivering when he deepened the kiss. Sin rubbed his thighs against her bottom for a moment, then released her. She trembled, gasping after their kiss. Henry nibbled his way down her throat to her left nipple. He sucked it deep, rolling it around with his tongue as she had his cock.

“There’s something wrong about hiding those beauties under a flattening corset,” complained Sin. He slid a finger up and down between her back cheeks.

“I’m going to taste you,” said Henry.

Sin spun her around to face him. His eyes gleamed. He bent and caught her with his shoulder. She squeaked when he stood up, and she folded, her bottom high in the air.

“Put me down!”

“You just relax and let us take care of you, Jessie,” said Sin. He held her legs against his chest, keeping her from kicking. “Make a mound on the bed,” he ordered. Henry moved to obey.

She pressed her hands against Sin’s back, raising herself up to watch. Henry lifted their extra clothes from the pegs on the wall, rolled them up, and placed it in the center of the bed. Sin lifted her off his shoulder and placed her, belly down, on the mound.

“Don’t move!”

She glared up at Sin. “Or what?”

His slow smile made her swallow in need. He rubbed his hands together. “Or I’ll swat your sweet ass.” He took a step closer.

Before she could scramble away, Henry knelt beside her and pressed down on her shoulders. “Do you want to see what we can do for you?”

She bit her lip. Making Henry explode in her mouth had made her want more. Though she complained, the thought of Sin spanking her for pleasure made her quiver. Henry drifted the fingers of his free hand between her thighs. She relaxed, wanting him to go deeper.

“You’re so wet, I know you want more.” Henry moved his fingers from her wet pussy back to the crack of her bottom. He scratched at

her hole, and she clenched. “I’m going to taste you, Jessie. To make you feel as good as you made me.”

Henry knelt behind her and pressed her knees farther apart. She resisted until he sank a finger inside her pussy. He pulled it out and brought it to his nose. He inhaled her scent and moaned. He set a gentle kiss on her pussy before pressing down, flicking his tongue. She arched her back in encouragement.

Chapter Fourteen

Sin smiled as Jessie melted under Henry's tongue. He'd nearly recovered from the explosive orgasm in the barn. Watching Henry warm their woman up would bring him up to full speed again.

For such a tiny bit of a thing, she was pretty demanding. Tough as a man, as well. Considering the work they'd done the last three weeks, she had to be. But take off her clothes, lick her pussy, and she purred like a diamond-pure woman. She was the best of both worlds, a hard worker and willing bedmate.

Henry, face shining with her sweetness, made Jessie twist and moan.

Sin wanted to bathe her, slowly and gently. He'd kiss every inch of her body. She was strong, but he was far stronger. Loving her made him feel like a real man. A man who had a home, a ranch, and a woman to cherish. Whole and complete.

Sin liked everything about a woman, but he was an ass man, fascinated by the curve of a woman's buttocks. He'd immediately exploded the few times he'd sheathed his cock in a woman's ass. Just thinking about it made him hard again.

The way Jessie moaned when Henry's finger scratched her asshole, Sin might be a whole lot of happy sooner rather than later. He scooped a dollop of cooking fat onto a plate and brought it to the bed. Jessie wasn't ready to take a cock there, but she might manage a few fingers.

"More!"

Sin's cock leaped to attention at her demand. He sat on the edge of the bed and held her breast. She turned her head to him. Her glassy

eyes begged him for pleasure. He squeezed her nipple, and she moaned.

“It’s time,” said Henry. He lifted Jessie off the bundle of clothes. Sin swept them off the bed. He lay on his back, taking their place.

“Climb on board,” Sin said, holding his hands out to Jessie.

She took his hands and crawled over him. Henry aimed Sin’s cock, and Jessie settled herself. She was so wet she slid all the way down. Her smile widened as she clenched him tight.

“Mmm, that’s nice,” she said.

She leaned back, taking his cock with her. He held his arms around her ribs, so small his thumbs almost touched, and helped her move up and down. Even though he’d come less than an hour before, he’d be doing the same soon if she kept that up.

Henry caught his eye and nodded. Sin pulled her so she leaned over him.

“I remember this,” she said.

She slid forward and back. Sin tugged gently until her breasts slid across his chest. She closed her eyes and helped herself to pleasure. Henry covered his finger in the fat and knelt behind them. Sin knew when Henry pressed his finger in her ass as Jessie’s eyes shot open, and she tried to sit up. He held her still, watching Henry’s elbow move slowly back and forward. After a moment, Jessie closed her eyes. She moved faster, pressing herself onto Henry’s fingers.

Sin released her to shift as she needed, and massaged her breasts. Her breathing quickened along with his. Henry added a second finger. He placed pressure on Sin’s cock through Jessie’s membrane. He grinned like a fiend and added yet another.

Jessie’s breasts slapped against Sin as she slammed back and forth, grinding her clit against his pubic bone. He filled her pussy with his cock as Henry filled her ass with more fingers than Sin bothered to count.

Sin gritted his teeth, holding back until Jessie took her release. Henry stared down, no doubt watching her take what she could. His

fingers in her ass, and Sin's cock in her pussy.

Jessie gasped above him, moaning her need for more. He met Henry's eye. They nodded. Sin pressed deep, pinching her nipple and Henry swatted her ass. She screamed and bucked frantically, crying and shivering. Her pussy's orgasm grabbed him tight. He erupted, pushing up with his heels, slamming Jessie onto his cock with his grip on her waist. Jessie wiggled, pulling the last pumps from his cock.

Jessie slumped onto his chest. They lay together, gasping for air. Their ears rang too loud from their orgasms to hear the door open.

"What the bloody hell is going on?"

* * * *

Ace stared at the bed. His bed. The unmistakable smell of sex filled the air. He left the door open and stalked into the cabin.

When he woke alone by the hot spring yesterday, naked, his first thought was relief he'd slept on his stomach. The mild pain on his ass was nothing compared to getting his cock sunburned. It swelled in reaction to the sight before him. Sin was on the bottom and Jessie in the middle. Henry, who must have been behind her, held up his right hand. It glistened.

Jessie hadn't wasted any time. He knew he'd been an ass to her, both last night and this morning. He didn't know how to tell Sin and Henry. No, the truth was he wanted to keep her all to himself. Too late for that, now.

After checking his assigned area, he'd returned to the cabin hoping she might be there. He hadn't expected to find his partner in mid-orgasm with her.

"Jessie said you fell asleep yesterday. She wanted to learn more. We obliged," said Sin between gasps.

Ace raised an eyebrow at Jessie. She kept her eyes clenched shut. The red on her face was not caused by a sunburn.

"She's a damn fine woman," declared Henry. He hauled himself

out of the bed and, holding his right arm straight to the side, staggered over to the washbasin.

“You pleased her?”

Sin nodded. He held up two fingers. “She’s a very demanding woman.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Ace tossed his hat onto the peg at the door. He scrubbed his hair with both hands. Suddenly he grinned. He strolled across the room, his boots thumping on the floor. He sat beside them on the bed. Jessie didn’t move. Her eyes were still shut, but he knew how to get them open. He trailed a finger down the curve of her breast, tickling her. She twitched, and then eyes so brown they were black glared up at him.

“You got a problem, bossman?”

He tilted his head to look at her eye to eye.

“Should I?” He waited while she thought it out.

“Just because I had sex with you doesn’t mean I can’t have it with Sin and Henry.”

She thrust out her lower lip. It was the same pout the brat used. Though she’d hidden the rest, he could still see her full lips, her soft cheeks and dainty, but strong, hands. Why hadn’t he noticed her femininity? Subconsciously he had, but thrust it aside as unimportant.

No more. He patted her curved bottom, stopping when he noticed a pink hand print. He caught Sin’s eye, receiving a wide grin in reply. Ace continued exploring, letting his fingers curve under her ass cheek. Sin’s cock was still in her pussy, enfolded by her swollen lips.

“You can, and will, have sex with all of us,” he said quietly. “One at a time, or all together, as you choose.” He placed his palm on the pink hand print, matching it exactly. “But I am the ramrod of the Double Diamond. If you choose to stay, you will obey my orders.”

She looked at Sin, then Henry. Both of them kept carefully neutral expressions. This decision would be hers alone.

“Only for work. You’re not my husband and have no rights over

me.”

“Husband?” He stood up, leaned back his head, and laughed like he hadn’t in years. “There’s no way in hell I would marry a woman like you!”

“What do you mean by that?” She scrambled off Sin, knocking against him in her rush. He winced, but smiled behind her back.

“The woman I marry will be a lady,” he explained. “She will be obedient, giving me the respect a man deserves. She won’t be a hoyden, wearing pants to ride her horse, wielding a bullwhip and yelling like a banshee.” He shrugged. “Now that woman, she’s the one I want to bed. Not marry.”

“Good! Because you’re the perfect example of why I’ll never marry!”

Totally uncaring that he was fully dressed and she was naked, or that he’d walked in as she screamed her orgasm, she stabbed him in the chest with her bitten fingernail, emphasizing every word with a jab.

He delighted in that passion in bed. But marrying a woman like her wasn’t worth losing everything else in the world. Like the village men, he would marry a quiet, biddable woman. His wife wouldn’t bring to bed what Jessie did, but he would have respect, both from her and from his peers. So while he had access to the wild, passionate woman in his arms, he would enjoy every moment.

He caught the hand jabbing his chest. One yank brought her blushing body next to his. He wrapped his arms around her hips and pulled her naked, wet pussy against the rising bulge in his pants.

“Why don’t we take some quilts to the hot spring? I want to wash you and then lick you clean, inside and out.”

“What hot spring?” Henry and Sin exchanged glances.

“I caught Jessie swimming in a big rock bowl of hot water uphill from here yesterday. I was about to take my belt to the brat when she rolled over and I saw breasts floating in the water.”

“All that time your muscles hurt from hair to toes, and you didn’t

say anything about there being a hot spring nearby?" Sin looked more hurt than angry.

"I couldn't let anyone see me until my three weeks was up," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"Why," asked Henry.

"I had to prove to Ranger that I could work hard, even under a greenhorn boss. I made it through the full three weeks, so it didn't matter if you found out about me." She looked at Sin. "Being female, I mean."

"Is there anything else you want to say, Jessie Bonham?" Sin spoke quietly, with an intensity that seemed out of proportion to the question.

"No. There's nothing else you need to know." She set her jaw.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm a grown woman making my own decisions about my own life," she replied, staring at Sin. "No one else has any say about what I do!"

Sin nodded, though Ace didn't think he looked convinced.

"What's this all about?" Ace looked from Sin to Jessie.

"Jessie says it doesn't matter, so I'll shut up," Sin replied. He shrugged it off and turned to Jessie. "Where did you say that hot spring was? We can all go."

"No," said Henry. He looked at Ace and Sin. "If anyone's taking Jessie anywhere, it's me. If, that is, the lady wants company."

Henry looked at him with quiet determination and a certain gleam in his eye. Ace's cock had hardened when he opened the cabin door, and it hadn't softened since. Henry usually took things lightly, preferring to laugh at the world as if nothing mattered. But when he set his mind on something, he went after it full bore.

"We need to get to know each other better," said Henry quietly to Jessie. He watched her as he slowly scratched his chest. She crossed her arms over her breasts, her bravado gone. His hand drifted down his belly to hang in front of his hip, framing his erection. Jessie's

nipples hardened.

“You’re right,” she said, still staring. She cleared her throat. “You could wash my back.”

“I intend to do more than that, Jessie Bonham,” murmured Henry. “I am going to seduce you.”

Henry’s eyes roved over Jessie’s body, from knees to forehead. A flush followed, rising from her belly, spreading over her breasts, and continuing to her face. She crossed her ankles and tightened her arms around her breasts.

“You can’t seduce a woman who’s already been with a man,” she said in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes, I can,” he said, meeting her eyes. “But it will take a very, very long time.”

She gulped. “It will?”

Henry nodded absently, as if he was already planning his strategy. “I’ll have to start from the beginning in case one of these louts missed something. I’ve been accused of being fussy, but I prefer to say I’m meticulous.”

Ace looked at Sin, who shrugged and grabbed his pants. Since Henry and Jessie stared at each other as if no one else existed, he gave in to the inevitable. Henry would take his time with Jessie, but she would share his bed when they finally returned. He bent over and picked up her clothes from the floor. He held them out.

“Sound travels far at night,” he warned Henry. “If Jessie screams, it’ll echo off the rocks and all down the valley.”

“She’ll make plenty of noise, all right.”

Henry trailed his finger in a curve along Jessie’s belly. Her skin quivered at his touch. He used the same fingers to twirl an imaginary moustache as he leered at her like a stage villain.

“Prepare to be thoroughly ravished.”

Chapter Fifteen

Something in Jessie's chest fluttered as she rode quietly beside Henry. She hadn't bothered with anything under her shirt, since the spring wasn't far. She wore a coat since the wind was up and she didn't know how long they'd be out. Her hard nipples rasped against the cotton shirt and her swollen pussy rubbed against the saddle with every step. But that didn't arouse her as much as the man beside her.

Every now and then she glanced over at him, but he looked straight ahead. He hadn't said a word to her since he declared his intention to ravish her. Though she caught a flash of his old self in the moustache twirl, his entire demeanor had changed. No more the flirting, easygoing friend, he had an intenseness that rivaled that of Sin or Ace. While she enjoyed the friend, Henry exuded a power she hadn't known was there.

How would she react when that intense power was directed at her?

Her saddlebags were full of quilts and food, more than they needed for the evening. She didn't know what was in his bags, and wasn't going to ask. He held a wooden bucket in his lap, having declared that no soap should ever go near the pristine water. They would soap up then rinse each other off with buckets of water before soaking.

It all sounded so ordinary. Get clean, soak in warm water, eat supper and then have a bit of sex under the quilts before coming home.

The smoldering looks he gave her in the cabin, combined with his new aura of strength, suggested reality was going to be far different.

"What happened back there in the cabin?" she finally asked. "I've

never seen you like this before, but Ace and Sin seemed to take it in stride.”

They rode for a minute or two before he answered.

“You’ve never seen me when I want something bad enough to fight for it.” He nudged his horse closer and looked down at her. “I want you.”

“Fight? For me?” She laughed. “I’m willingly with you, knowing you said you’ll ravish me. There’s nothing to fight.”

He shrugged and looked forward, head high. “I want you, Jessie Bonham Elliott. More than I’ve wanted anything in my life.”

He spoke as if stating an unassailable fact, like declaring the sky was blue. She shivered at his fervent claim. Did he mean this night, to seduce her for hours? Or was he proclaiming to mark her as his, forever?

She worried her lip as they rode. She didn’t want “forever” with any one man, like a husband, but she enjoyed sex. She didn’t have a lot of experience yet, but so far she hadn’t found any reason not to continue to do so. Since she intended to live on the Bitterroot Ranch, and the Double Diamond was halfway between there and town, she’d be able to visit when she wanted. Until Ace found that perfect wife he demanded, she could enjoy herself with all three men.

“I want you, too, Henry Bennett. And I intend to enjoy this evening immensely.”

“That makes two of us. Is this it?” He pointed to the huge boulders rising on their left.

“Yes, we walk from here.”

She dismounted and led Trouble up the path. The horse, knowing good grass was near, eagerly followed. They left their horses hobbled, took the saddlebags, and continued on. They’d have another hour or so before sunset, then the temperature would drop. Since it was a clear night, they were likely to get frost. She planned to be in bed with Ace’s warm back against hers by then. No more sleeping in the barn with only a few cats to snuggle up to.

“This is wonderful, Jessie.”

They stopped at the top of the path and looked down into the pool. Steam drifted across the water, thicker where the water was warmer. A burst of wind almost blew her hat off. It skittered down her back and she shivered.

“Seems that wind is determined to follow us here. Maybe it won’t be so bad near the water,” she replied.

She carried her saddlebags over to the sandy patch on the right. It was close enough to the water to make it easy to rinse off, yet the soap would go into the sand instead of sliding over the rocks and into the pool. Henry set down his saddlebags, dumped something out of the bucket and followed her.

“If that wind doesn’t slow up I might not take as much time washing every square inch of you.” Henry sat on a rounded rock to take off his boots. “We’ll have to come back on a sunny, warm day.” He looked around. “The sun won’t be up long enough for me to count all your freckles.”

“I don’t have freckles!”

“You ever checked your back end in the looking glass?”

She shook her head. She didn’t want to know how badly her back was scarred.

“Then you wouldn’t know, would you?” He adjusted his hat as he looked her up and down. “I guess it will take me even longer, since I’ll have to find them first.” He leaned back on one elbow, shifting until he was comfortable. “Strip ’em off, Jessie.”

His sharp eyes bored past her clothing, past her skin, into her soul. No one had looked at her like that before. Not Ace, not Sin, and certainly not the elegant dudes back East. Heat flowed wherever he looked. If he kept looking at her like that, she wouldn’t care if it was chilly. She took off her coat. He held his hand up, so she tossed it to him. He set it on the rock so it protected his elbow and ribs. He gestured for her to continue.

When she took Henry’s hard cock into her mouth, she felt the

power a woman had over a man. She felt it again now. He wanted her to get naked for him. Would she rip her clothes off, as he had earlier, or take her time, teasing him?

As long as she wasn't naked, she controlled him. She turned around and bent down to undo her boot. She aimed her bottom at him, wiggling it a bit as she worked the boot off. She caught a glimpse of him as she switched to the other foot. He looked like he was carved into the rock, he stared at her so hard.

Beth told her that the woman controlled many things, including the bed. She liked having this power over men so much bigger and stronger than her. She stood up and faced him. He winked, as if saying he knew what she was doing. She ignored it and pulled out her shirt tails.

She started at the bottom, opening one button at a time, prolonging his agony. At least, he looked like he was in pain, the way he grimaced. He shifted and undid his pants buttons. He groaned as he pulled out his cock. It pointed right at her. The setting sun touched the drop on the tip, making it shine like a diamond. She licked her lips, remembering his taste. He suddenly sat up. In the time it took her to undo the rest of her shirt buttons, he was naked.

Naked, alert, and very aroused.

"Get those clothes off now," he growled.

Her heart thudded at his demand. She lifted her shoulders and pressed them back. She knew it would make her breasts stand out and the shirt gape. "Or what? Your threats won't scare me."

His threats mightn't, but the way one corner of his mouth curled up in a slow leer did.

"I don't make threats. Just promises."

She undid her belt and buttons. She pushed them over her hips and let them fall to her feet. She stood there in her long shirt. The wind caught one side of it and flipped it open, exposing her right breast. His cock bounced, and he caught it with his hand.

"That's how I'd paint you. A wild, brazen witch, the fires of

sunset blazing behind her as she dared any man to take her.”

“You... You paint?” She managed to get the words out past her shudder of arousal. The way he stared at her made her feel like that witch.

“I used to. If I had a brush I’d...” He looked down, then back up. “I don’t need a brush when I have fingers.”

He stalked toward her. She went to move but almost tripped on her pants, still around her ankles. He caught her around the waist before she fell. When she was steady he got rid of her clothes, tossing them on the rocks.

“You don’t have any paint.”

He touched his finger to the end of his cock. It came away wet.

“Yes, I do.”

He pressed his finger against her nipple. As soon as he lifted it, her now-damp nipple tightened in the chill. He did the same with the other one.

“I need more paint,” he murmured.

He ran his knuckles over her belly and down. He did it so lightly she felt her skin contract at the same time as a jolt hit her pussy. His hand followed, sliding between her wet lips. She tilted her hips to encourage him to go deeper, but he shook his head, his eyes smiling at her.

He placed his wet fingers over her breast, drawing radiating lines as his fingers narrowed around her nipple.

“Rose with magenta and a pale shadow of cobalt blue,” he said. His hand rose to her face. One finger outlined her lips. She opened them to breathe more easily. “Alizarin crimson, like a dark foxglove petal.” He sank his finger into her mouth.

“This is from you and Sin. Before we leave, you’ll taste my essence mixed with yours.”

She sucked his finger deep, using her tongue to play with it as she had his cock.

“You liked sucking my cock, didn’t you?”

She nodded, and then nipped his finger. He pulled it out with a laugh. "The soap is in my left saddlebag along with a couple of flannels. I'll get some hot water."

She squeaked when he slapped her bottom as he passed. She rubbed it and glared, more for the effect than any pain. In fact, she felt a surge of need. A need to know what his cock could do to make her demand more.

She opened the saddlebag and found two bars of soap, an example of Henry's usual thoughtfulness. He might call it being fussy or meticulous, but she appreciated it. She set the soap nearby and took out a couple of wide but thin strips of flannel, likely from old bed sheets. She rose on her toes to set them on the rocks, high enough that they wouldn't get splashed.

A set of rough, wet hands caught her breasts and held her there.

"You have any idea how those curves of yours affect a man?" He pressed his chest snug against her back. His hard cock stopped them from spooning closer. His breathe warmed the left side of her neck.

"When you reached up like that with your ass out, your belly and breasts leaning forward...damn!"

He nipped a tendon and instantly soothed it with a kiss. He groaned and turned her to face him. His cock jutted out, slightly to the right of center. It was thicker than Ace's or Sin's. She lifted her breasts and rubbed them against his hairless chest. The smooth skin was a nice change. Her nipples caught against his skin rather than sliding through chest hair.

He took a step back. She pouted up at him. He touched her nose with his finger in an unspoken warning to stand still. She admired his smooth bottom as he picked up the oval bar of rose-scented soap. He dipped it quickly in the hot water and turned back to her.

"Clasp your hands behind your neck. I don't want your hands in the way while I'm working."

"You call this work?" She did as he said, smiling to herself when her raised elbows, and breasts, made him swallow hard.

He soaped up his hands and set them on her waist. He winked and then turned so one hand washed her back and the other, her front. She shivered, her skin chilling as it got wet.

“Don’t take too long. I’m getting cold.”

“I told you. I’m meticulous.”

“What’s that mean?”

“That means it will take as long as it takes. I want every trace of Ace and Sin gone. Then I’m going to seduce you as if you’d never had a man touch you.”

He bent over, sliding the fingers of his left hand between her ass cheeks and the right between her pussy lips. She moved her feet apart to give him more room. He warned her with a look not to move and got more soap. He knelt on the sand, his head by her stomach, his left arm between her legs. The soap let his finger easily enter her bottom. She shuddered, but he quickly removed it and concentrated on her cheeks with that hand. She moved her own concentration to the fingers of his right hand, working on her pussy. He separated each fold, circling her clit but not quite touching it, until he was satisfied.

“Now to rinse. Close your eyes.”

She expected him to dribble the water over her shoulders. Instead, he poured the whole bucket over her. Warm water sluiced off the soap but quickly turned chill. She shivered and turned to the pool.

“Not so fast,” he warned. “Your turn to wash me.”

She glowered but he dared her to complain like a girl. She filled the bucket, purposely getting it from the cooler part of the pool, and set it at his feet. She tried to use the rose soap on him, but he shook his head and handed her the yellow soap.

“I want you to be just as thorough as I was,” he said.

She glowered, as she wanted to wash him quickly and get warm. So she got her hands very wet and rubbed soap all over his body, from his ears to toes, avoiding the middle. When he growled a warning, she knelt with her left shoulder facing him, as he had done to her.

She lathered up her hands well and grasped his cock with her right

hand. It jumped in her grip. She couldn't close her hand around it, but held it as steady as she could. She sent her left hand between his legs and behind his balls. She swept her fingers between his cheeks. His cock jumped again. She wondered if men liked a finger in their bottom as much as women. She pressed her index finger in to the first knuckle and twisted.

"Kee-rist!"

He bent forward, grabbing her shoulders for balance. His cock swelled even more in her fist. Taking it as a request for more, she smiled to herself and pushed farther, up to her second knuckle. He groaned as she pulsed in and out. When he shuddered she pulled out, wrapped her left arm around his thigh, and concentrated on his front.

She gripped his cock as best she could and ran her hand up and down. She'd only done it twice when he covered his hand with his own.

"Enough. Time to rinse me off."

His deep voice was rough, almost shuddering. She smirked to herself, proud she could affect him so much. He knelt and she picked up the bucket. She poured it all out, moving the flow from his front to his back. As soon as it was empty she set it down and danced down to the water, eager to get warm. She waded in as far as her hips and ducked to cover her shoulders.

She pushed off and floated on her back, sculling to keep from sinking. When she was cold she let her body sink a bit, then went back to the surface. The switch from chilly to hot and back again woke every pore and nerve ending.

"Oh, that feels so good," she moaned.

* * * *

Henry gripped his fists at his side and watched Jessie float. If this is what Ace saw when he stormed after what he thought was a boy, no wonder he hadn't made sure she was a well-used woman.

Her breasts bobbed in the water, aflame from the last of the sunset. Her moans bounced around the rocks, surrounding him with her need. She might be moaning about the hot water now, but there was more to come. Lots more.

First, a fire. He'd brought kindling and a couple of logs in the bucket in case there wasn't anything nearby. The heat would warm the rocks behind it and reflect it back to where he planned to seduce his lady. By the time they finished in the water, the heat should have dried the sand so the quilts wouldn't get wet.

Fussy, be damned. When things are well planned, the outcome is usually better.

When Sin first said Jessie's full name, he'd been too shocked by her naked, female, body for it to register. But on the ride up, he'd worked things out.

Ranger was taking care of Jessie just as Henry would his own sisters. For some reason, the Double Diamond men were good enough to marry the only Elliott female. He was damn sure nobody but Ranger, and maybe Patrick, knew Jessie was living with them. If Trace or, God forbid, Ross and Gillis found out she was no longer a virgin, they'd be strung up.

Unless one of them proposed marriage. After tonight, Jessie was well and truly compromised. She was no longer innocent. He chuckled quietly as he shaved a piece of kindling to catch a spark. Jessie's demands for fulfillment proved she was more than ready to marry. His respect for Ranger went up a couple notches.

Today was the day Jessie should have turned up at the Bitterroot Ranch, demanding Ranger take her on as full partner. Instead, she was being thoroughly, and delightedly, debauched by three men. How long before Ranger stopped by to find evidence?

Since Ace slept downstairs, and he made it clear that Jessie would share his bed, he would be the one Ranger found if he came sneaking by before they were up. Ace would finally have a purpose for the top hat he'd insisted on carting all this way. He could wear it at his

wedding.

Henry let the warmth of the fire seep into him for a moment. He looked around as the last rays of sun faded. They would build a shelter here so they could come in the winter. Tell the others about it and share it as a family resource. Maybe that would make up for taking Jessie before vows were said.

He snorted a laugh and stood up to watch her float, arms and legs wide. Nope. Nothing would make up for that. Nothing but a shotgun wedding as soon as possible. He chuckled as he walked down to the water. He'd have that warm wife heating his bed this winter after all.

She saw him coming and rolled over. She frog-kicked to the far side of the pool, her ass high out of the water.

"I can swim like a fish, so don't try to escape." He waded into the water and then ducked as she had. "I wish you'd told us about this weeks ago. My muscles were dang sore."

"If you weren't greenhorns, you would have ridden your whole property before Ranger and Patrick delivered your cattle. I shouldn't have had to tell you about it."

"You're right."

She swirled in the water to face him. "You admit it?"

He nodded and swam toward her. She watched him come. "Why shouldn't I? It's the truth. We've learned a lot from you over the last three weeks." He stopped and treaded water a couple feet from her.

"You're man enough to admit a woman's right?"

"I'm man enough to do a lot of things." He moved six inches closer. "When someone is right, it doesn't matter whether they're a child, woman or man. Right is right." Another three inches.

"So you don't mind that I'm better than you at a lot of things."

He'd heard that tone from his second oldest sister often enough to know what she meant. She didn't want to disappear in the woodwork. She wanted to be her own person, and accepted as such.

"The more I learn about ranching, the more I realize how much there is to do, and how difficult it is for only a few people to do it."

He dropped his voice and came another few inches closer. He could reach her now, but it wasn't yet time.

"You are smart as well as intelligent and educated. In London, where there are hundreds of people to talk and amuse oneself with, having a wife interested in the same things is not important. How many men and women live in this valley?"

"When Ben gets here there'll be twenty-one men and three women."

"If those twenty-four people are smart, capable, and eager to do well, we will all be better off. Why would I exclude anyone who could add to our community? Especially if one of the women has abilities and strengths that we need, and is eager to help?"

He moved so close her breasts almost brushed his chest.

"Your smarts, ability, and personality attract me, Jessie, but there's a lot more to you. You're brave, and resourceful, and funny. I want to stand beside you as you fight, and at the same time, protect you from anything that might harm you."

She bit her lip as she stared at him. Her chin trembled.

"And you make me so damn hard I want to spread your legs and take you, pounding my cock in you until we both explode. And then I want to do it again."

She moaned and grabbed him, arms around his neck and legs around his waist. He wrapped his arms around her, churning his legs to keep both of them upright.

"Turn onto your back so we can get closer to shore," he said.

She released him and did as he asked. He caught her with his right arm under her breasts, and the two of them kicked toward shore through the steam. When he could reach the sandy bottom, he towed her until the water reached his waist. He released her, turning her chest to his again. He ducked until their faces were at the same level.

"That's better," he murmured. He pulled her close. "Miss Jessamine Elliott, I wish to court you, Western style. You have any objections?"

“What’s Western style?” She sounded breathless, as if she’d swum hard for hours.

“We do whatever feels good and damn the consequences.”

A hand grabbed his cock. His mouth went under water, he gasped, and took a mouthful down the wrong pipe. He stood up, choking and laughing. She kept her grip the whole time.

“That what you’re talking about, cowboy?” She laughed as well.

“Damn right,” he replied.

He held her hips for a second and lifted. She knew what he wanted and guided his cock into her heat. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled herself onto his cock. They both groaned as she wiggled her way until there was no gap between her skin and his.

“I wanted to take hours before we got to this point.” He rested his forehead on hers. “I was going to lick, kiss, and suck every bit of you, making you shake until you demanded that I make you come. Then I’d stop, and start over again.”

“It’s too cold to do that tonight. You’ll just have to show me on a sunny day.”

“Damn right, I will.” He looked up at the sandpit. “The fire looks ready for us.”

“A fire?” She laughed. “I didn’t even notice. That sounds good.”

She opened her ankles and wriggled as if to get free, but one of his hands held her ankles tight behind his back.

“Hold on tight.”

She gripped tighter, squeezing his cock. He gulped and strode through the water. Every step moved his cock inside her. Climbing the rocks was worse, or perhaps he should say better, as her pussy rubbed against him. They laughed as he dried them off and spread out the quilts as best he could with her attached like an erotic limpet. Finally, he went to his knees and gently laid her on her back. Though he wanted to finish the job, he pulled out. His cock felt so hot he was surprised it didn’t steam.

“I want you in me,” she demanded, trying to sit up.

He placed one hand on her ribs and held her down. He gave her the look that made the younger schoolboys follow his orders without question. "Not yet. There's a certain fresh pussy I want to get acquainted with." He covered her with a quilt to keep her warm.

"Don't take too long. I'm getting hungry," she said.

Her pout challenged him to prove he was better than Ace or Sin. "You're going to be too busy gasping to think about supper." He shuffled back and lay down, cupping her butt cheeks in each hand. "I don't need food when I have you." He inhaled her perfume and brought his mouth between her legs.

* * * *

Henry slid his hands under her, one on each cheek, and lifted her to his mouth. His slick body felt so good against hers in the water, and his thick cock filled her more than she'd known, but his tongue worked magic.

He attacked her like he did everything, with determination and a bit of fun. She lay sideways to the fire so they could both see each other. He looked up, his laughing eyes barely clearing her curls as he nosed her clit and sucked her lips. She gasped and pressed herself up with her heels to demand more, but he growled a warning as to who was in charge.

His tongue flicked sideways, soft like butterfly wings. He opened his mouth wide and sucked on as much of her as he could, his tongue now like a lance, stabbing into her pussy. He lifted her high and probed her bottom with his tongue. He set her down and went on one elbow, curling his fingers into her and up. He found a place that made her shudder.

"Like that, do you?"

"Do it again!"

He did, and she slammed her hands against the quilts. She'd been building since Sin exploded in her, hours before. Henry's fingers,

tongue, and lips brought her so close she could feel the coil about to spring.

“Not yet,” he said, and reared above her. He leaned on his palms, smiling smugly down at her. “Time to taste us.”

She grabbed his ears and pulled him down, kissing him deeply. She tasted nothing different from before, but it was good. He slid his tongue between her top lip and teeth. She went to do the same, but he lifted his head, both of them gasping.

He looked at her intensely, predator to prey, his eyes wide and wild. Without breaking their visual bond, he inserted his cock in her an inch. She tried to grab him with her inner muscles, but he wasn’t far enough in. She lifted her heels and grabbed another few inches. His cock was so wide it stretched her. She didn’t have to squeeze much to grip him. He leaned his weight on her, holding her from controlling his depth.

“You are mine, Jessie Elliott. Mine to take, and mine to share.” His voice shook.

“I’m not yours until you take me, Henry Bennett,” she taunted.

His eyes widened further. He lifted, supporting himself with his left hand. Just enough to slide his right between them and touch her clit. She trembled as he moved it in circles. He balanced on both palms again, high above her, and pulsed. Bit by bit, he filled her to the hilt. She sighed, thinking he’d give her what she needed, but he slowly began pulling out.

She needed to come. Needed so bad she didn’t care what happened.

She grabbed his ass with both hands and pulled him into her as she pushed with her heels and tightened her inner grip on him.

“Not. Yet.” He gasped the words.

His greater strength allowed him to ease backward, that thick, wonderful cock slowly leaving her.

“Now! I want to come now!”

“Not. Until. I say.”

He glared down at her like a gargoyle, his face all screwed up as if in pain. He raised himself on his hands again and slid in. She gasped as his cock rubbed against that spot. He did it again, moving slowly in and out. She pressed her head against the ground, arching her breasts.

“Touch yourself,” he ordered.

She put one hand on her breast, and the other reached for her clit. She pinched each just the way she liked it, shuddering at how near her orgasm was. Almost crying at how far.

“Now!”

He reared back and slammed deep. Again and again. Nothing mattered but the sensations. Again and again, hard. She opened her eyes. Every time his balls slapped against her, he grunted, rutting like a beast. Those dark eyes, staring into hers, the fire reflecting in them like the bonfires of hell. And still he went on, filling every part of her, mind, body, and soul.

“You’re mine!”

He angled his body to the left and reached between them. She put both hands on her breasts, offering them to him. He touched her clit, and everything came together. She opened her mouth, and he dropped on her, his mouth over hers, his hands on her shoulders as he pumped his hips into her, again and again, as she screamed into his kiss.

Chapter Sixteen

Ranger rode into the Double Diamond yard as the sun rose. He'd expected Jessie to come galloping onto the Bitterroot Ranch the moment three weeks were up, crowing how she'd bested him.

When she didn't show, Patrick wanted to ride over after supper to make sure she hadn't taken off, but Ranger said no. He wanted to give Ace enough time to get in trouble. Then he explained that Jessie would never marry unless she roped herself into it. Jessie would have come to them unless she had a very good reason not to.

Or three good reasons.

Ranger quietly dismounted and led his horse into the barn. He smiled at the barn cats staring down at him from the rafters. Trust Jessie to be surrounded by cats. The only loving she'd been able to grasp from the MacDougals was her horse, Nightwind, and feral cats. After that, no wonder she didn't want to be married.

"Jessie? You up yet?"

He kept his voice low. No answer. He tied his horse and walked to the last stall, where Jessie had made her own nest. His shoulders relaxed when he saw three young cats curled on a blanket. No sister.

Leaving his horse in the barn, he quietly approached the cabin. No smoke, no smell of coffee. He looked in the side window. A rumpled bed with Ace on his back, one arm above his head. The other rested on the naked back of the woman sprawled across his chest.

A woman with short curls of brown hair.

Ranger backed away from the window as if he was sneaking from an enemy. No sound gave him away as he retrieved his horse and headed home. Inside, he yelled in triumph. Whatever Ace and Jessie

had done in that bed, or not, she was well and truly compromised. He'd wait a couple of days for Ace to announce the wedding. If nothing happened, he'd tell Trace what he'd seen through the window.

He'd better do it with Beth around, or Trace might take his head off, then come after Ace with a few guns.

For now, he'd keep quiet.

When she left for Virginia, Jessie gave him her most precious possession, her mare Nightwind. He'd wanted to do something to thank her in return. Finding her a husband that suited her, or three in this case, was a suitable payment. She might not appreciate the gesture for a while, however.

* * * *

Jessie dreamed of lips on her breasts. She smiled and skimmed her hand over her belly to the thatch of hair between her legs. She bent one knee and stroked her finger over her clit. Her lover kissed her nose and brushed his lips over hers. His hair tickled her ears. He nipped the side of her throat, right at the tendon. She arched her back. He groaned and suckled her nipple. She moved her legs wider apart, pressing her finger into her pussy.

He pressed her bent knees wide. He slid his hands under her buttocks and lifted them, tilting her to nuzzle her pussy. He flicked his tongue over her clit. He suckled both nipples.

"Mine," he whispered from between her legs.

"And mine," replied a deep voice near her chin.

She opened her eyes. Laughing, light blue eyes with dark rings met hers. One winked. "Good morning," whispered Sin.

"Damn right it is," said another voice. She flicked her eyes to the right. Henry winked and caught her nipple with his lips. She looked down to find herself at the edge of the bed. Ace knelt between her thighs at the foot of the bed, his morning beard deliciously rough as

he rubbed his chin over her mound.

Heat rose from her thighs, over her belly and chest, all the way to her forehead.

“You’re not turning shy on us, are you?” Sin kept her breast warm with his hand while he talked. “I wouldn’t want this to go to waste.”

She was almost falling off the left edge of the bed. Sin, kneeling on the floor, lifted her left hand and placed it on his hard, hot cock. Her fingers curled around it as if knowing what to do. “That’s it,” he said. He slowly thrust his hips forward and back.

She tightened her fist around him and pulled. He lifted his eyebrows in a silent question. She licked her lips and opened her mouth in answer. His eyes darkened, and his nostril flexed like a bull. He shifted her shoulders to bring her mouth closer to his cock. His kneeling height was perfect for her mouth.

A drop of clear fluid seeped out of the tip of him as she watched. She licked him, the salty taste delicious. Ace went back to work, probing her pussy with his tongue. She swirled her tongue over the head of Sin’s cock, demanding more. He groaned. She let her teeth drag over him as he thrust, slow and sure, over her tongue.

When Henry brought her home from the hot spring, he gently undressed her and tucked her into bed with Ace. She didn’t remember a thing since. She shuddered when Ace found the right spot on her clit. He did it again and she moaned.

He replaced his tongue with his cock and pressed into her. Henry took care of her breasts. Sin backed away, his cock hard, his chest heaving to breathe. He motioned for Ace to take care of her without his interference.

Ace grasped her hips and sped up, filling her deep every time. Henry nibbled her left breast, Sin her right. She closed her eyes, feeling every touch of their fingers, tongues, teeth, and cock. The spiral of need she was becoming familiar with rose, taking her with it. She clenched Ace as he pounded into her. He changed angles, someone pressed her clit, and she exploded. She triggered Ace, who

pounded into her, extending her ride. He slumped against her while her head was still spinning.

He pulled out, the bed shifted, and another hard cock entered her. She looked up at Sin. He stared, his eyes drilling into her as his hips thrust. Henry placed her hand around his cock. She guided it to her mouth, flicking the tip with her tongue.

Sin shifted his hands and lifted her legs. Ace held her ankles while Sin entered her. The new position brought different parts into contact. Sin's bellow of completion set her off again. She sucked hard on Henry's cock and was rewarded with a stream of salty essence. She licked her lips and sighed.

Henry laid his hand on her head. Sin, still throbbing, sank onto his knees. Ace set her feet down on the bed and winked.

"Time to get these lazy asses off to work," he said.

Sin smacked Ace's head since he was too far for either Jessie or Henry to reach.

Chapter Seventeen

“Stew’s hot,” said Henry. “Is Jessie eating supper?”

Sin looked down at the softly snoring woman. They’d worn her out. Again. No wonder, considering the amount of work she did each day. He gently tucked the quilt over her shoulder.

“Maybe later,” he replied. She could barely be seen in the rumpled covers.

Like everything else she did, Jessie slept in barely controlled chaos. She rode like the horse was part of her, even though Trouble bucked if anyone else climbed into the saddle. Her laugh, often at herself, had Ace smiling so much Sin and Henry weren’t sure he was the same man who’d crossed the ocean with them.

Four long days and wondrous, too-short nights had passed since Ace discovered Jessie in the hot spring. Ace acted as if nothing would ever change, that he’d have the best of both worlds. A wildly eager woman to share with his partners. Come morning, she was an equally eager ranch hand. Yesterday she laughed when Ace finally used his lasso to catch something that moved. It didn’t matter that the calf, startled at being interrupted as it walked to the river behind momma, easily shook off the rope.

Sin knew the dream would soon crash, so he cherished every hour. He prayed they would live through the aftermath when Ranger finally came to see why Jessie hadn’t moved in after her three weeks were up.

He lifted his head as pounding hooves approached. He picked up his rifle and stood beside the window. The early September sun was fading, the sky turning from rose to purple. He recognized Trace’s

horse. The paint's white patches were easy to see in the dusk. Other horses, too many of them, followed.

Time to pay the piper.

* * * *

"Trouble?" asked Ace. When Sin cursed, Ace moved to stand beside him.

"Maybe," replied Sin. "It's the Elliotts." He looked closer. "And the MacDougals."

"I could see Ranger stopping by to see why Jessie was still here, but why the others?"

Ace frowned and rubbed his jaw. He looked at Jessie, still sleeping, naked under the quilt. He didn't want anyone walking in and finding her there. He didn't mind letting everyone know she decided to stay for a while, and why, but it would embarrass her to be found asleep and naked in his bed. He didn't consider her a loose woman, but others might not see it the same way.

"Let's meet them in the yard."

They replaced their rifles and left their gun belts on the table with Henry's cooling stew. Ace stepped out first, then Sin and Henry. Eight horses lined up in front of them. Eight men looking like they wanted to take someone apart. Ace nodded like a good neighbor though he couldn't understand why they glared at him.

"Something I can do for you gents?"

"We've come for Jessie. Three weeks was up four days ago."

Ace recognized Ranger as the speaker. The hair on his neck rose when a darker-skinned man suddenly held a long blade and tilted it to catch the last rays of the sun. That would be Ross, also known as the Devil MacDougal. Having lived with his Indian relatives for years, he was known to be deadly with a knife, gun, rope or his bare hands.

"She decided to stay on a while," said Ace.

"She? So you admit Jessie's female. Where is she?" Trace's growl

was more grating than usual.

“Sleeping.” Ace looked from face to face. “What business is it of yours?”

“Do ye know the lassie’s name?” asked Gillis MacDougal in icy tones. Ace had met the man a number of times. He was two inches taller and far wider, with a temper to match his fiery hair.

“She’s Jessie Bonham.” Ace turned to Ranger. “What the hell is this all about? She’s well over twenty-one and whatever she does is her bus—”

“She’s our sister,” said Ranger.

Ace closed his mouth. His heart pounded, but he couldn’t run anywhere with eight armed men facing him down. Not that he’d run from anything in his life.

“Her name is Jessamine Bonham Elliott.” Ranger scratched his chin as if they were discussing which horse to ride. “I’m guessing she didn’t mention that last name.”

“No,” said Ace hoarsely. He locked his knees to keep from reeling as blood drained from his head. This time, it wasn’t heading for his cock. He couldn’t think, much less plan a response. Jessie, an Elliott?

“Wake the lassie, dammit, so we can take her home!” roared Gillis.

Ranger stuck a finger in his ear and shook it. “After that bellow, I expect there’s no need.”

Ace heard the door open behind him. He didn’t turn. *Please, let her be dressed.* The drag of a quilt on the wood porch, along with the sudden appearance of eight pistols, a yard-long claymore, and a knife or two, proved his wish didn’t come true. He held himself straight and very, very still.

“Nice seeing you again, Jessie,” said Jack. Ever eager for trouble, he grinned and tipped his hat. “Got anything on under that quilt?”

“What are you doing here, Jack?” She looked around and gasped. “Is *everyone* here? One, two, three, four—what’s going on? Dammit, I can take care of myself!”

Ace groaned quietly as Jessie told off the eight men who must weigh fifteen or twenty times more than herself. The men who would have his balls strung up like—no, they'd do to him as they did to bull calves. One slice and he'd sing soprano. He pressed his knees together.

"Obviously, we think you can't," said Simon.

"Get dressed, Jessie," ordered Trace.

She gasped. "Your beautiful voice, it's gone!"

"Old news," he growled. "Get a dress on. You're coming to the Rocking E."

"No!"

"What do you mean, no? You're staying with Beth until the wedding."

"Wedding? I'm not getting married!"

"Yes, you are!" chorused the men around Ace. Even his partners joined in. The truth finally sunk in. He'd be forced to marry the very woman who was the anathema of proper behavior.

"Why do I have to get married just because I had some fun? You all did it lots of times, and you never married. Why, Ranger, I remember a redhead—"

"Shut up, Jessie," ordered Ranger.

"Don't tell my fiancée to shut up," ordered Ace.

He was a Langford. Langfords were gentlemen. They might gamble their estates into deep debt and carouse with expensive whores, but if they debauched a virgin of quality, they married her. He'd felt no maidenhead the first time he took Jessie, but she'd been riding rough all her life. No wonder she didn't know how to kiss. She'd learned bloody fast, though. And then she demanded more from Sin and Henry.

He turned around and finally saw her. She likely thought the faded old quilt made her look decent. All he could think of was the naked woman underneath and how one tug would reveal everything. Not the best thing to think of when surrounded by an ex-virgin's well-armed,

angry brothers.

“Shut up, Jessie,” he said.

“I’m not your fiancée, Mr. Kendrick bloody Langford!”

“Because you are a woman of good birth, unclothed, in my home, you’ve been compromised. That means we’re getting married.”

“Compromised?” Her voice went up an octave. “If I’m compromised for being naked, what do you call what we’ve all been doing the last four days and nights?”

“What the hell!”

All eight horses milled around, some of them rearing in reaction to their riders’ sudden tension.

A cold barrel at his neck and an ominous click made Ace freeze. Since he faced the house he saw Ross MacDougal’s knife at Sin’s throat. Ranger covered Henry with a pistol. Ace felt a need to laugh uproariously at the tableau they must make. It was almost like a pantomime presented at the Haymaker Theatre in London. If a wife was to be forced on him, he’d damn well enjoy the farce.

“What,” rasped Trace in Ace’s ear, “did you do to my sister?”

“I made Jessie very happy.” Ace turned his head just enough to catch Trace’s eye.

“And Henry and I made her even happier,” added Sin. “As often as we could.”

Silence, except for noises made by horses and night birds, descended on the yard.

“Argh, you men make me sick!”

Jessie stomped off the porch and across the yard toward them. Though she was barely covered, every inch of her radiated disgust. She stopped in front of Ace.

“Trace, take your gun from my boss’s neck. Thank you for the thought, Ross, but I like Sin’s blood inside his body. The rest of you, put up your guns.”

Trace glared down at Jessie. She scrunched up her face and stuck out her tongue at him. His moustache twitched. He snorted. After a

small shove against Ace's skull with the barrel in warning, he returned the gun to his holster. A thin trail of blood seeped from Sin's neck into his shirt when Ross pulled back.

The fact that Jessie, all one hundred pounds of her, could control these men made Ace realize he needed some lever over her that her brothers didn't have. Sex? Yes, he could live with that. She had enough passion to need lots, and lots, of sex. Luckily, he had two partners to help keep her in line.

"Did you call me your fiancée because my brothers forced you?"

Jessie's big eyes looked up at him. Yes, or no, each had pitfalls too great to get into tonight.

"Of course not."

She relaxed.

"I did it because I lust after your body."

"Wrong answer!"

Trace's words were followed by a blast of pain in his temple. His legs buckled, and the world turned black.

Chapter Eighteen

“If you killed my boss, I’ll never speak to you again!”

“He’s not your boss, he’s your fiancé, soon to be your husband,” said Ranger.

“The way you screech, that’s no threat,” said Trace.

She growled and kicked him in the knee with her bare foot. He didn’t budge, just smirked. Ace was down for the count, so she turned to the others. A very surprised Ross held himself erect. Sin, grinning proudly, held Ross’s knife against his own throat. Henry scowled, his hands in the air due to the pistol Ranger aimed at his head.

Trace looked down at Ace, sprawled in the dirt. “He took responsibility for his actions, so we can’t kill him, dammit,” he said. He looked at Ross. “Maybe you could slice off something unimportant, just as a reminder. An ear, or his left testicle.”

“You still have no sense of humor, Trace Elliott!”

“And you’ll be a widow before you marry if he can’t keep his pecker in his pants.” Trace nudged Ace in the ribs, none too gently, with his boot.

“We respect Jessie to make her own decisions, even if none of you do,” said Sin in a cold voice. He pressed the knife in, just a bit. Ross gritted his teeth but didn’t attack. Sin stepped back and lifted the weapon. He held it out, hilt first, to Ross. Both men now had a thin trail of blood on their necks.

“I say she deserves all three of them,” said Ross. He wiped the tip of his knife on his pants and made the blade disappear. Sin braced when Ross’s fist came at him, but didn’t defend himself. Ross slowed his punch and hit Sin hard in the shoulder. Sin grunted but didn’t

move.

“Saturday,” growled Trace. “In front of Baldy’s Saloon. One on one.”

“We’ll be there,” said Sin.

“You idiots!” Jessie glared at the ten men standing around her. Most of them smirked or laughed, eyeing her reaction.

She knew what would happen. They’d beat the tar out of each other, get drunk, and be best buddies. The women would have to take care of things while the men had their play. Damn if she’d mend any of them!

“If you damage certain parts of the Double Diamond men, I’ll get you back.” She looked at each Elliott and MacDougal, meeting their eyes one by one. “Do you understand?”

She’d done stuff to them over the years, things only a woman would think of. She couldn’t best them physically, so she found other ways. Little things, like sewing all their drawers shut. They either had to borrow a pair, which made them shudder, or get the inside of their thighs and other parts chafed as they rode all day. A couple times she soaped their socks. She only put itchy powder in their clothes once, because it transferred in the wash. Since she and Sunbird washed their own clothes, the women were the only ones not itching. The MacDougal got hives, and she got whipped for endangering the Clan. A man couldn’t wage war and protect his Clan if he was scratching, according to The MacDougal.

“You hear that, boys?” said Ranger. “It’s okay if they can’t walk, talk or see, but make sure their cocks work just fine.” He slapped Henry on the back, almost knocking him over.

“Likewise,” drawled Sin.

“You had supper yet?” Henry examined his nails as if the answer didn’t matter.

“Nope,” said Nevin, speaking up for the first time. “The Elliotts appeared on our doorstep before we could eat.”

“Lots of antelope stew to go around. I could make biscuits and

gravy to stretch it.” He looked pointedly at Ace, still out cold. “Since you’ll soon be family, I won’t put out the good china and silver.”

Ranger had a good idea all they had was tin plates, and not enough of them to go around. He appreciated the attempt at humor, even though he was still ready to geld all three of them.

“Did Jessie make the stew?” asked Ranger. She stuck out her tongue at his insinuation.

“Henry knows his way around a stewpot,” said Sin.

“In that case, we’ll unsaddle the horses.”

Ace groaned at their feet.

“What about Mr. Kenrick bloody Langford?” Jessie nudged him in the thigh with her bare foot. He groaned again.

Jack, next oldest to Jessie, looked down at Ace. “Jessie, you get some clothes on. I’ll take care of your man.”

“I can take care of myself.” Ace pulled himself to one knee. He rocked a moment before forcing himself up. Though he wavered for a moment, no one reached to help him, not even Jessie. She understood pride.

“Sin,” groaned Ace, “did you not tell these bloody Elliotts I have a need for sarcasm?”

“No, I did, the first time we met,” said Henry. “Trace was building the extra room for those girls. I said Ace likes to see how many people he can irritate in a day.” Henry looked around. “Today’s a good day. Ten people ready to strangle you.”

“Ten?” Ace looked at Henry.

“You think I like being attacked just because you didn’t ask the woman whether she had six or ten brothers?”

“He’s not engaged,” protested Jessie. “He never asked me to marry him.”

Ace dropped back to one knee. He tugged her left hand free. She pulled the quilt tighter to her body with her right.

“Jessamine Bonham Elliott. Will you marry me?”

Jessie looked around at all the weapons suddenly pointed her way.

“What, are you going to shoot me if I refuse?”

“No,” replied Sin in a too-smooth voice. “But I will paddle your ass so hard you won’t sit down until the wedding. That’s about ten days, sweetheart. You really want that?”

Her pussy flooded. She inhaled and licked her lips.

“Damn, she’s considering it!” Jack’s hoarse but delighted whisper broke the stillness.

“I brought Nightwind from Texas,” said Ranger.

Jessie yanked her hand away from Ace and turned to him. “She’s here? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ranger holstered his pistol and jammed his hands on his hips as if he wanted a fight.

“You gave her to me when you left Texas, Jessie.”

“You were the only one I trusted to care for her while I was gone. You brought her to the ranch for me, didn’t you?”

Ranger shook his head. “She’s mine, now. I’ll get some good colts from her.”

“But, she’s never been bred!”

“Yes, she has,” said Trace. “She let Sin’s Emperor cover her while he helped Sapphire with her foal. She found a stallion to best her.” He raised a threatening eyebrow at her. “Just as you chose Ace.”

Jessie looked from Trace to Ranger. Both had closed faces. Nightwind, the beautiful mare who’d kept her sane the last few years in Texas, belonged to Ranger. She slumped and nodded his ownership of her horse.

“I figure she’d make a good wedding present,” said Ranger.

Jessie heard the challenge in his voice. She saw it in the way he stood, feet wide and fists on his hips. She straightened up, understanding. If she married Ace, she got her horse back. If she refused, they’d find a way to make her do it anyway, and Ranger would keep Nightwind.

Her mare had found a stallion who was her match. According to her brothers, she had done the same. Today was not the time to fight a

battle. She'd win the war, though. Eventually.

"I don't know anything about weddings."

"Beth and Amelia do," said Trace.

Eleven men gave a collective sigh at her capitulation. Weapons slipped into holsters and up sleeves. Gillis slid his claymore into its sheath at his back.

"We'll keep the news in the family until then," said Trace. The others nodded.

"You planning on behaving at this wedding?" asked Ross in a teasing lilt. His lip twitched. "You got a mite riled at Louisa's."

"I didn't like the way they looked at me." She stuck out her chin.

"Three broken noses, one or two unable to stand straight, and a few blackened eyes," explained Patrick to Ace. "Jessie's got a mean right hook as well as a fast knee."

"I don't expect any black eyes at my wedding," said Ace. He looked around the ring of faces. "Unless you boys take a while healing after meeting my fists."

"Nae, 'tis ye who'll be needing a beefsteak or two over yer eyes."

"Just make sure to leave that pig sticker of yours at home," said Sin.

"Pig sticker?" Gillis roared. "I'll have ye know this is me grandsire's *claidheamh mór*!"

"Enough! There'll be nothing but fists," confirmed Trace. He slid his glance to Ross. "I'll tell Frank to bring a bigger box to hold your knives this time. He'll be the ringmaster."

Gillis warned Ace with his eyes that there'd be further words on the subject of the MacDougal family's precious heirloom.

"You said something about stew?" reminded Ranger.

Immediately, the men's focus switched from fighting to food. They joked about Jessie's cooking, though she could do a better job over a campfire than most of them. It was just that she hated using a kitchen stove because it meant she was confined to the house. Like a wife.

Mrs. Kenrick Langford. How dare they force her to marry just because she finally got to taste what they'd enjoyed for years! She sighed. At least she'd get her horse back.

"To heck with the whole lot of you. I'm going to bed. Alone!"

"Damn right, you will!"

She stuck her tongue out at Trace again. They laughed as she pushed past and stomped toward the barn. She held her back straight though the quilt trailed around her feet.

"You're going the wrong way," called Ace.

"I'd rather sleep in the barn than put up with you lot!"

Hearty male laughter excluded her. As always, she was on the outside, looking in. Not strong enough to be a boy, or sweet enough to be a girl. She might be a woman, but she was still the best cowboy on the Double Diamond!

A deep roar of laughter rolled out of the dark. She sighed. Once men got together like this, they didn't stop for a while. She'd had a long nap, so wouldn't be able to sleep even if they shut up. She quickly dressed, putting on her corset for riding comfort.

She hadn't yet met her sisters-in-law, Beth Elliott and Amelia MacDougal. They'd married three men each. Surely they'd have a few ideas on how to keep a husband or three in line. She glanced at the sky. Clear, with enough of a moon. If she saddled up and left immediately she could get to the MacDougal homestead with lots of time to talk before bed. Both women would likely want to know what their men were up to, as well.

Fifteen minutes later she rode out, heading west.

* * * *

Sin, always aware of the woman he considered his near-wife, noted her direction. He spoke quietly to Ace and slipped from the room. She wouldn't know he followed. She needed to believe she was free, and that marriage would not clip her wings.

He liked her sparkle. He saw the way her nostrils flared when he threatened to spank her. She was tempted, and everyone knew it. That would make sure there weren't complaints from her brothers later on.

He waited until Jessie settled her ugly white horse in the MacDougal barn and got up her nerve to knock. The door opened and Amelia pulled her in. He snorted a laugh. Beth and Amelia's husbands might be surprised at what trouble Jessie could get them into. Not that it would bother those wives. From what he'd seen, they were strong and independent. Just like Jessie.

He rode home, anticipating what he'd do with Jessie next time he had her to himself. He unsaddled and joined the crowd. Once the men at the Double Diamond realized their wives weren't waiting up for them, they set in to some serious talk. They cheered when Ace brought out his last bottle of good whiskey, a sacrifice for the cause of brotherhood. Sin hid his wince, knowing how long it would be before they could afford another bottle.

Chapter Nineteen

“It’s about time!”

Jessie opened her mouth to reply but was hauled into a hug by a slightly taller dark-haired woman. Amelia MacDougal. Jessie returned the hug, more to keep her feet than as a howdy-do. Amelia grabbed her hand and towed her into the kitchen.

“Do you think your baby girl will grow up to look like Jessie, Beth?”

A tall blonde woman sitting in a rocking chair nursed a baby in the corner. The hefty baby stopped sucking for a moment, decided Jessie wasn’t worth wasting effort over, and went back to work. Beth wore a plain blue dress and apron, her hair tied up like the way Jessie had to wear it in Virginia. She smiled down at her baby, who returned the grin.

Jessie’s stomach contracted. There was her nightmare. Stuck inside, waiting for a husband who was out having fun. She might want the baby and the fun, but not the husband.

“First I have to have a baby girl,” said Beth. “Just because Simon insists that’s what he wants, doesn’t mean he’s going to get it.” She nodded gracefully to Jessie. “We’re so pleased to finally meet you. The fact that there are no men around to interrupt makes it even better. If you’re here, does that mean you’re marrying Mr. Langford, and they’ll be celebrating all night?”

Perhaps the heat of the kitchen after the cold ride, the shock of meeting her nightmare head on, whatever it was, Jessie had to fight to keep upright as her head spun. The walls throbbed, in and out, squeezing all the breath out of her. Hands pulled her forward and

pressed her into a chair. She sagged, bending forward and hugging her stomach.

She didn't know how long she sat there, rocking back and forth. Bodies moved around, and light voices chatted quietly. She let the sounds sink into her as if from far away. She remembered...

It wasn't this kitchen, but one almost the same. Mama rocked back and forth, singing quietly as she fed Patrick. Jessie was a good girl. Yesterday she kept Ben and Ranger outside while Mama birthed her new baby.

Outside, Trace, Simon, and Jack laughed as they played a boy's running game. Even Ben and Ranger could play though they were a year younger than she was. But she couldn't keep up because her skirts got caught between her legs and tripped her.

She had as many brothers as the fingers on one hand. She prayed hard every day, morning and night, for God to bring her a sister. She promised she'd always be a good girl if God made Mama's baby a girl.

But God sent Patrick instead. Another brother. That meant God didn't want her to be a good girl. She couldn't be bad, because it made Mama cry. And whoever made Mama cry, got a whupping.

Through the window she heard her hero, Trace, yell that he was first, again. She loved his voice, especially when he sang to her when she was scared. He was always a good boy. If God didn't want her to be a good girl, she'd be like Trace.

The memory faded. She heard two women chatting quietly nearby. Beth and Amelia. The next time she put on a dress was for Louisa's wedding. That brought lusting eyes and Fin's attack. She was forced to wear them in Virginia, but never without a knife or three strapped to her body.

No matter how hard she tried, she wasn't a man like Trace, strong and independent. She was female. Men liked women weak and dependent. The laws were made to keep them that way. First by their fathers, then their husbands. She was smarter than Fin or Hugh, but

she didn't have a cock between her legs. A woman's brain meant nothing. Only her ability to feed, clothe, and have sex with a man, and then raise his children. Not hers, as a woman didn't even have the right to her own body, much less what she brought forth from it.

When she married Ace, strong, confident cowboy Jessie Elliott would disappear. Mrs. Kenrick Langford, who didn't even have a name of her own, would take over.

"Oh, Mama, if only you'd lived," she whispered.

She crossed her arms over her knees. She fought it as long as she could, but tears leaked out. She snuffled. Someone crouched beside her and rubbed her back, just like Mama used to do. Something broke inside her, and everything fell out.

* * * *

Beth murmured quiet words as Jessie sobbed. Having enjoyed independence for a few days before being forced to marry Trace, her own eyes teared up in remembrance for what Jessie believed she had lost.

"She's crying as if her life is over," murmured Amelia.

"It is," replied Beth quietly. "Ranger said she had to be tough and strong to survive under Finan MacDougal's hand. As long as she followed his orders, she could pretty much do what she wanted. She loved to be outdoors. When she completed her studies in Virginia she was finally free. Ranger said she expected to be his partner, living like a cowboy for the rest of her life." Beth looked down at the sobbing woman. "I expect that dream was all that kept her going. And now it's gone."

Amelia poured hot water into an enamel bowl and set it on the table. She placed her precious rose-scented soap and a clean flannel beside it. "We have to show her that being a wife isn't a type of living death."

Beth stayed near as Jessie's sobs slowed. Every couple of breaths

came with a shudder. Finally, she breathed almost normally. Beth patted her shoulder and moved away to give her space.

“When you’re ready, wash your face and we’ll have a glass of cordial,” said Beth.

“I thought most women offer a cup of tea when someone breaks down,” croaked Jessie.

“Beth and I are not ‘most women,’ and neither are you.” Amelia pressed a handkerchief into Jessie’s hand. She took the cordial out from behind a pile of baby diapers and poured three equal glasses.

“I’m a damn good cowboy,” said Jessie.

Beth noted she blew her nose quietly, unlike her brothers. Jessie may fight it, but she was a feminine woman. She just hadn’t had a chance to find that out. She was raised like her brothers and then treated as a ranch hand in Texas. Then she had to learn to survive in the excruciatingly proper Virginian society, following rules that used to make Beth scream inside her head. Jessie needed to find herself. She couldn’t do it surrounded by testosterone-charged men butting heads over her.

“I can dress up pretty and flutter my fan like a lady, pretending I don’t have anything as vulgar as a brain.” Jessie sat up and glared at them. “But I can’t be a wife. I hate being inside all day. I want to have control over my life, not bow down to my husband as if he’s the master of my life, just because he has a cock and I don’t.”

Beth held back a smile at Jessie’s stubborn lower lip. She’d seen the same look on James, though he was only six months old.

“Actually, you’ll have three cocks bending down to you,” said Amelia. “If that’s what you want. Blackcurrant cordial?”

Jessie lifted her red-splotched face. She nodded her thanks and took a sip. Beth laughed when she spluttered.

“This is nothing like the cordial they serve out East!”

“No one makes cordial like Rowena Jones,” said Amelia reverently. “She’s gone back East but passed on her secrets to us. One of them is the proportion of alcohol to fruit, as in very high.”

Beth lifted her glass in a toast. Amelia followed. They waited until Jessie lifted hers as well.

“Together we are stronger than all nine of our men. The law might be on their side, but we control the home.”

“And the bed,” added Amelia.

They clinked glasses and turned to Jessie. She did the same and finished her glass. Amelia topped them all off. Jessie gulped the second down. Beth nodded and Amelia filled Jessie’s glass again. In another ten minutes or so, Jessie would be far more relaxed. She would answer questions from her heart. Questions that needed answering.

“I didn’t want to marry either,” said Beth. “But Frank Chambers locked me in jail.”

“He took her boots because she hoofed Big Joe between the legs,” said Amelia. “Joe didn’t like it when Beth refused his suit. Mayor Orville Rivers said Beth had to marry by midnight. Old Walt Chamberlain was the only man with enough gumption to stand up to Big Joe and put his name forward.”

“Charlie, the deputy, had opened the cell door and was attacking me when this tall, handsome man with a broken voice rescued me,” continued Beth. “He kissed me, and I was lost. That night he showed me why a woman wants to be married. I found out the next day he had two other reasons, Simon and Jack!”

“My older sister, Prudence, was married to Gillis,” said Amelia. “After I got these burns, no man would court me.” She tilted her head to show Jessie the scars.

“That’s nothing,” said Jessie. “Did you want to marry?”

“No, but Prue thought I would be happy with Nevin. She knew she wasn’t going to live long after her baby was born, and begged me to come raise Hope. When my father died, it was either sign the wedding contract Gillis sent or have my horrid cousin lock me in the attic because I was so ugly. So I came to Tanner’s Ford with Nevin’s ring on my finger.”

“But, you’re married to Ross.” Jessie frowned in confusion.

“Yes, but I didn’t know that until the next morning. By then I’d fallen for Ross. Since Nev was supposed to be my husband, and he looks so much like Ross, it was easy to fall for him as well. Because Gil was mourning my sister, it took a while to get him to realize that life must go on.”

“How is that going?” asked Beth.

“He’s making up for lost time,” said Amelia, blushing.

* * * *

Jessie blinked at Beth and Amelia. Her head buzzed, but in a good way. She put her empty glass down, almost missing the table, and leaned back. She didn’t know women could talk openly about sex the way men did. She finally had someone who might understand how she felt.

“I used to think Henry was sweet. He likes to do special things for me, like finding a pretty rock and putting it by my plate at supper. He doesn’t say anything, but I know.”

“You’re right, that is sweet,” said Amelia. “Nevin brought me flowers the first morning.” Her eyes sparkled. “But it was really an excuse to catch me sleeping. Naked.”

“Why don’t you think Henry’s sweet anymore?”

Jessie gulped at answering Beth’s question. She squared her shoulders and spoke the truth. “He’s still sweet during the day and when the others are around, but when it’s only the two of us, he gets a bit possessive.”

Beth rolled her eyes. “Don’t they all! What about Sin?”

“He’s the biggest, with the widest chest and long fingers. He’s really, really good with his fingers and tongue.” She thought for a moment. “Henry’s pretty darn good as well.”

“Does the rest of their body match?” asked Beth.

“Big men, big feet, big cocks,” chanted Amelia.

“And big, cold feet,” laughed Beth. “What about Ace?”

“Ace sees me as an equal in bed. He likes to cuddle after.”

“I don’t think you want to know about your brothers,” said Beth.

“But I love them all, and I’m happier than I could ever imagine.”

“I never knew what love was, until I fell for Ross, then Nevin, and Gil.” Amelia sighed. She met Beth’s glance and shared a smile.

“How do you know that you love them?” asked Jessie quietly. “I haven’t seen love since my parents died. I don’t know how it feels.”

“How do you feel when Ace is near? Do you want to kiss him?”

“Yes, but at the same time I also want to smack him half the time.”

“Sounds like love.” Amelia and Beth shared a laugh.

“Jessie, you would not have let Ace into your body unless you loved him,” said Beth gently. “Before they all left tonight, Ranger told us how you looked at Ace, and Sin and Henry, when you didn’t think anyone saw you. And they look at you the same. Wanting, but not sure if you want them.”

“Sin was the only one who would come near me for three weeks. He rubbed my back a couple of times at the beginning. After that, he kept away as well.”

“Hon,” said Beth, “Sin was the only one who knew you weren’t a boy. That first time he rubbed your back? He did it to see if you had bindings on. Then he came to Trace to ask permission to court you, so Ace could marry you. He knew you were suited, just as Ranger did.”

“I realize now that Ranger set me up to find a husband he approved of, but I can’t believe Trace knew and let me stay.”

“Sin promised you would not be touched while you worked there.”

“I wasn’t. It was only after, when I went swimming at the hot spring, and Ace found me.” Jessie flushed at the memory. “That was the first time he realized I was female.”

“What do you think about him as a husband?”

“He said I could stay at the ranch as long as I followed orders, but

he would never, ever marry a woman like me. Because I'm not a lady."

"That was his fear talking, hon," said Beth. "Those men love you as much as you do them. They just aren't ready to admit to it yet. And you are every inch a lady."

Amelia held out her glass. "Sisters?"

Jessie's eyes glistened with unshed tears. She bit her lip. She nodded and held out her glass. "I always wanted a sister."

"Next on the list is to build you a home," said Beth.

"A home?" Jessie blinked.

"Someplace where you can feel safe and loved. Where you can surround yourself with whatever you want." Amelia pointed to the front room. "I have my sister's lace and quilt pictures."

"I love the wonderful drawings Amelia made of Trace and James," added Beth. "And my children, James and Bridie and Meggie—"

"Daniel, Hope and this little one," continued Amelia.

Jessie looked at their bellies. She might be growing a child of her own already. She gulped.

"If I had to do all the work I do, but for someone else, especially without pay, I would hate it as much as you do," said Beth. "But I love my home, my men, and my children. I'm happy caring for them. Just as Trace, Simon and Jack are happy to care for us."

"I'm not as good at this home-making yet," said Amelia ruefully. "But Auntie is such a help, and Daniel as well."

"I couldn't do it without Meggie and Bridie," said Beth. "We're a family, working together, each doing what we're best at."

"I'm the best cowboy on the Double Diamond," said Jessie.

"When we design your home, we'll make sure to make a place for a housekeeper," concluded Beth. "That way you'll have someone to do those things you'd rather not. You could hire a woman who would have no place to go otherwise."

"I never thought of that," said Jessie. She slurred her words a bit.

“I think it’s time we find our beds,” said Beth.

“With no men in sight for once, we’ll get to sleep all night,” said Amelia smugly.

“Unfortunately.”

Chapter Twenty

“Tell that damn woodpecker to use a tree instead of my head.”

Sin’s yell bounced around in Ace’s head like a billiard ball. He groaned. The tapping continued. Ace opened one eye halfway. He carefully shifted his head toward the door. Yes, the noise came from that direction.

“Whatever you want, go away,” he called out.

“Get up. The horses are saddled and ready to go.”

“Jessie?” After years of moderation and control, Ace no longer had a head for whiskey. However, a man doesn’t refuse toasts from his new brothers, especially with the last of his good whiskey. He ran his tongue over his teeth and wished he hadn’t.

“Gillis said I’m not allowed in the cabin unless you’re awake, alert and decent. He came home hours ago.”

The rope bed fought back as Ace tried to stand. He looked down. Yes, he had pants on. He was awake enough to stand, and dressed enough to be called decent. Alert was another thing, but he could fake that.

“Come on in,” called Sin from the other end of the bed. The man easily rolled to his feet. He wavered a moment, wincing at the light. Sin might get a headache after a night of drinking, but it never affected his stomach.

Jessie opened the door and took three steps. She stopped, wrinkled her nose, and looked around the room. She stomped over to the stove and grabbed the empty stew pot and metal spoon. Ace covered his ears, but it didn’t do any good. She clanged them together so loud it would wake everyone in Tanner’s Ford. Hell, in Bannack City!

“Get a wiggle on, boys. Light’s a’ wasting.”

Henry crawled down the ladder from the loft. “Where are your brothers?”

“Out working, like you should have been an hour ago.” She clanged the pot lid again. “Are you man enough to work today, or are you so hungover you’re going to embarrass me?”

“Did you decide to marry me after all?” Ace met her eyes across the room. “I want to know if I’ve wasted a good morning-after drunk.”

Jessie stomped over to the bed. Each footstep, complete with the jingle of spurs, reverberated around his skull a few times before leaking out his ears. She narrowed her eyes and glared up at him.

“I’ll be at the wedding.” She growled like a hungry bear. “But only because I want my horse back!”

She poked him in the gut and stomped back out. She tossed the spoon and lid on the stove on the way past. As a final wake-up call, she slammed the door.

Sin laughed so hard his shoulders shook. He leaned sideways and fell back on the bed, still chortling.

“What is it you find so amusing, dear boy?” Ace looked around the room for his boots.

“That is one damn fine woman.”

“I beg to differ. She epitomizes everything I dislike in a wife.”

“That so?” Sin rolled to his feet again. The motion caused Ace’s stomach to roll. “Then why are you marrying her?”

“Because when I found out she was female, I was so damn horny I grabbed her offer and took her virtue!”

“Ah!” Sin and Henry exchanged shrugs. “We thought it was because you wanted her brains, her abilities, her horse and her inheritance. And her body, of course.”

Ace blinked at Sin. “What inheritance?”

“Ranger and the others thought they’d have to make their own way north and move in with the Rocking E if they wanted to escape

The MacDougal. But when Jessie turned twenty-one, she found out her grandmother was the only Bonham left. Mrs. Bonham said the four youngest Elliotts would get an inheritance. But there was a catch.”

“There’s always a catch,” said Henry. “Especially when there’s a rich harpy in the picture.”

Ace winced in memory of Henry’s wealthy Aunt Ophelia. The slightest hint of weakness, and she could flay skin with her acid tongue.

“Only if Jessie proved she was a lady would she see a penny. That meant two years at the Virginia Female Institute. Ben, being a lawyer, helped her to prove he and his brothers were gentlemen enough to receive their portions.”

“If Jessie spent two years there, she knows how to behave properly,” said Ace. He closed his eyes in relief. When his stomach complained, he opened them once more. Many of their friends, also younger brothers, went after rich American girls for their fortune. One of the reasons he, Sin, and Henry came West was to make their own way. He’d not touch a penny of Jessie’s money.

“Jessie sacrificed a lot for her brothers,” said Henry. “They owe her. They bought the Bitterroot Ranch and cattle with that money. Jessie’s brothers said they’d build her a home for her dowry. I, for one, would like to spend the winter in a place that the wind didn’t howl, though.” He looked pointedly at the sun streaming between the logs to land on the bed.

“Jessie earned the money, and she can keep it. We’ll make it on our own.”

“I’m not giving this back.” Henry lifted a cloth bag off the table. He weighed it in his palm and whistled. He looked around the small cabin. “Trace doesn’t want Jessie to be a poor relation to Beth and Amelia.” He held the bag six inches above the table. When he saw Ace watching, he let go. It fell with a hard, solid *clunk*.

“You wish me to guess what is inside that bag?”

Henry shook his head at Ace. "It's gold. Couple pound's worth, I figure."

"Where did it come from?"

"You spent half the night arguing with Gillis," said Sin. "We took the opportunity to ask a few questions about family history."

"And?"

"Both families arrived here in 1846. Plenty of time to pluck gold nuggets from a few streams before anyone knew it was there." Sin absently scratched his chest. "I figure Trace and Gillis have enough to pay off the debt on all three of our family estates."

Ace met Sin's hard stare. "That has nothing to do with us. I can see using their money to build Jessie a decent home. I won't refuse the building. But the rest will come from our sweat. I have no intention of tugging at their coat tails. I wouldn't do it in England, and I'll be damned if I'll do it here!"

Sin and Henry nodded.

"Are you working today or do I have to come in there and whup your asses?"

Sin's lip twitched at Jessie's bellow. Henry snickered. Both fell silent when Ace ground his teeth.

"What do we do with the gold?"

"You and Sin bury it somewhere up the hill," said Ace. "I don't want to know where."

Ace sat up, head and stomach reeling, and stomped on his boots. His temper rose as his head throbbed. Did the Elliotts think they could buy him? Jessie would be embarrassed by him? He was as good, or better, than her blasted brothers! So he wasn't as good on the range, but they'd done it all their life. He could do many things they couldn't. He'd show them he was a force to be reckoned with. And he'd start with their sister!

* * * *

Jessie waited on Trouble between the cabin and barn. She was unwilling to go in and roust them again. She had a bit of a headache thanks to drinking potent cordial as if it was juice, and banging the pots had hurt her head as well.

She was about to dismount when the men finally hauled their sorry asses out of the cabin. Henry and Sin shuffled around back, but Ace crossed the porch and came right toward her. In fact, he huffed and puffed like a steam engine as he stomped across the dirt.

Now he was up and moving, she regretted her words. Maybe banging those pots was a bit too much as well. He had a bit of that look Fin, Hugh, and their father got. Almost as if steam came out of his ears. Usually someone got beaten shortly after.

Yeah, he was pumping his fists. He squinted his eyes in the morning sunshine, and his color looked a bit too white. Trouble felt her fear and snorted. Ace kept coming, his face all screwed up.

He didn't yell, but that could be because his head hurt too much. His expression was a lot like Hugh, who liked to punch her in the chest and belly. Fin preferred to use his boots. Their father used a belt or the back of his hand.

She slapped the reins and took off before he could tan her hide. Ace yelled something, but she kept on riding, leaving the danger behind, for now.

On the MacDougal spread, if you ran from their pa's punishment, you got it worse. Fin and Hugh didn't have that power. As long as she got away from them at the time, she was safe for a while.

She pushed Trouble west, toward the place she'd found the cigarette makings. If she found more evidence of someone watching, she'd have an excuse to go into town and talk to Frank Chambers. Then she'd head to the Rocking E. Trace said she was to stay with Beth tonight. They'd adopted three children who were eager to meet her.

Maybe by tomorrow Ace would have calmed down. Or would he be like The MacDougal, and punish her worse for running?

* * * *

“I found more tracks, Sheriff,” said Jessie, settling in the extra chair in front of Frank Chambers. “Someone’s been watching the Double Diamond. The tracks lead along the ridge to the east, then down to Tanner’s Ford.”

“Good to know, but there’s not much I can do about it.”

Frank nodded for Jessie to drink her coffee. Mary was back, which meant he didn’t have to drink black sludge. He would never offer a tin cup of jailhouse coffee to a lady in a dress, gloves and parasol, but he couldn’t imagine Jessie dressing that way. Though, from what he’d heard, she spent two years covered in frills and bows.

Even dressed in pants, shirt, and boots, she was a lady from the tip of her nose to her tiny feet. But, like Beth and Amelia, she was strong and proud. She reminded him a bit of his wife when they were first sparking. Of course, Mary had never worn anything but a dress.

“What’s this I hear about a fistfight between your brothers, cousins, and the Double Diamond?”

Jessie groaned and dropped her head back. “Don’t ask me. I think the whole thing is ridiculous. Grown men beating each other up in the name of friendship? Gah!”

“Mary and a few other women are trying to raise money to build a schoolhouse and church. One building, used for both.”

Jessie sat up. “Beth was saying she hoped there’d be a school in the next few years. Amelia’s teaching Daniel how to read, but Meggie and Bridie need more.”

“What would you think if we charged a couple dollars for people to watch the fight? The money would all go to the Tanner’s Ford School and Church Fund.”

“Then their fight would actually have a purpose.” Jessie nodded. “Five dollars each.”

Frank thought about the high cost of the needed building and

nodded. "Instead of a free-for-all, we could set up matches. Maybe draw names."

"What if we charged a fee for others to join in? Ten dollars, with a cash prize for the winner." Jessie had dimples when she smiled coyly. "Of course, the ladies would suggest a *real* man would donate his winnings to the fund."

"All weapons get locked up in there." Frank pointed to the lone jail cell. "I don't want any beer or whiskey until the show's over. Maybe the ladies could sell lemonade."

"We could have other competitions as a warm-up. Roping or riding greenbroke horses, winner gets a few ounces of gold."

Jessie laughed when he nodded in agreement. He knew she planned to win at least one of the prizes. She jumped up and hugged him. He held her just as hard, thinking of how much he missed his daughters.

"Bloody hell! There you are!"

Ace stood in the door, a tall, black shadow. Frank felt Jessie sag before she straightened like a flagpole.

"We're planning a fundraiser for the Tanner's Ford school and church building," she said. Her voice, instead of laughing, sounded brittle.

"Is there a purpose to this demonstration of affection, Sheriff? Or are you staking a claim on my fiancée?"

Frank gave her arm a friendly squeeze before letting her go. "Get off your high horse, Langford. I've been hugging Jessie Elliott since she first rode into town in front of her pa."

"Why are you here?" The fun-loving young woman was gone, replaced by a hard, cold cowgirl.

"You are not to leave the Double Diamond without my permission. Do you understand?"

Jessie gaped at him for a moment. She shut her mouth and stuck her hands on her hips.

"No, I don't. I'm not your wife, and I don't need your permission

to do any damn thing.”

“But you are going to be my wife. That changes everything.” Ace stepped forward. Though he spoke and moved quietly, Jessie backed up. “I will not allow my fiancée to be seen in public unless she is decently dressed, acting like a proper wife. And you will never swear again.”

“I hate dresses,” she blurted. “I can’t ride in them, and they twist around my legs when I walk.”

“Then I guess you won’t be going far from the cabin,” replied Ace, quiet and sure.

Frank could almost feel the heat generated by the two young people as they stared at each other. There was anger, but also a different type of burn.

“If I have to marry someone, I’ll marry Sin, not you. At least he likes me.” She panted as if she’d run all the way from the river, uphill.

“You no longer have the right to a decision.”

Frank winced. Instead of August heat, the temperature in the room dropped to a mid-January freeze.

“You agreed to marry me, Miss Elliott. Therefore, everything about you is under my control.”

“No!”

“This is for your own good. I won’t be made a laughingstock because my wife flaunts her body to every roustabout and miner like a two-bit whore. You can, and will, do that in private. But in public you will show respect by obeying me in every way.” He looked over her body. “At least you wore a long coat to cover your bottom. Otherwise I’d have to punish you.”

She blanched. She looked right and left, but the jail had only one door, and he stood in the way. He jerked his head.

“Get home before anyone else sees you.” He stepped to the side. “Go!”

She scrambled past and out the door, pulling it closed behind her as if to keep him from following. Ace stood tall for a moment and

then sagged onto the stool Jessie had vacated. No longer the outraged husband-to-be, he dropped his head on his hands and groaned.

* * * *

“You’re in a heap of trouble, son. That woman will never forget how you humiliated and scared the hell out of her.”

Frank tossed the remains of Jessie’s coffee out the window and poured another cup. Ace shook his head at the offer, keeping his hands deep in his pockets. Frank suspected they were tightened into fists.

“If she’s afraid, she’ll follow my orders,” said Ace. His voice shook. “How else can I keep her safe?”

“Keep her safe?” Frank sighed and settled his hip on one corner of his scarred desk. “Your fiancée is almost as good as Ross with a knife, her roping is some of the best I’ve seen, and I’d bet on her shooting over Jack. She’s a ferocious pixie, fast and sweet and deadly.”

“Thank you,” said Ace. His eyes proved the words were only a polite form of speech. “I’m aware she can kill me in many ways. Is that supposed to encourage me to let her wander around town whenever she wants?” He stood and paced across the jail. “I heard how Beth had to kill two men right in front of her own home. Two more kidnapped Amelia, again from her home. If she hadn’t burned her prison down around herself and Ross’s ravens hadn’t shown the way, Amelia would be worse than dead.”

Ace turned to Frank.

“The Elliots and MacDougals had enemies who attacked their women at home. Jessie will be safe at the Double Diamond’s cabin. But her coming into Tanner’s Ford is dangerous. There’s all kinds of rough men who could grab her from behind one of these buildings.” He held up his hands in a shrug. “If she comes to town, she must be with me, Sin or Henry, and she must behave like a perfect wife. We’ll

keep her safe.”

“You think if she puts on a dress and spends her days cooking and cleaning that everything will be fine?”

“Of course. The only danger to her is in town.”

“Have you forgotten how you acquired your land and cattle?” Frank shook his head. “You’ve got at least one enemy, son.”

Ace tossed his hand as if dismissing the idea. “You people seem to think Smythe’s the devil incarnate. He’s just a lower-class braggart. A bully, hiding behind his money.” Ace smirked. “I understand the man has a fear of horses. Any man who is afraid to sit astride a horse is not worthy of my attention.”

“Smythe may have come from a lower class than you, but now he has money, and money means power. He’s cozying up to the governor and the railroad men. Don’t dismiss him just because he wasn’t born with your privileges.”

Ace dropped his head. Frank noted his quick breathing, the fists on his hips. Even the cords of his neck stood out as he fought to control his temper. Frank watched the boy calm himself. Whatever he’d said had hit Ace hard. The boy might be the son of an Earl, but something about his past was stuck in his craw.

“Some ‘privileges’ come at a very high price, Sheriff,” said Ace quietly. Frank saw a flash of pain and betrayal in Ace’s eyes. “But we were discussing my fiancée. The one who will behave properly if I have to chain her to the bloody stove to keep her safe!”

Frank had a good idea Ace would never follow through on the threat, made out of frustration. It was obvious the two of them shared a passion that they wouldn’t admit to. He and Mary would have a good chuckle tonight. Young love, when both parties denied its existence, was always a source of entertainment to those well-married.

Watching Jessie tame the three lordlings would brighten his days. With the older Elliots and the MacDougals settled with their wives, he was looking forward to Ranger trying some shenanigans. The

Circle C men were too mature for that, but he had hopes for the J Bar C cousins. The Flying X had Southern boys, too gentlemanly to cause much ruckus.

Damn, he was looking forward to that fight! He bet Jessie's men would want to squash their in-laws to prove their worth. Be interesting to see if Jessie would holler for her brothers, or her husband and his partners. She was ornery enough to do both. As soon as she started walking she followed Trace everywhere, tripping over her skirts to keep up until her ma finally let her wear pants right after Patrick was born. Jessie was demanding as all get-out, but a hard worker. Ace had to learn she was smart as well.

"You think Jessie wandered into town because she had nothing better to do?"

Ace shrugged as if he didn't give a damn. Frank scrubbed his face with his hands.

"She came to me because she found proof someone's been staking out your place."

Ace straightened up. "What proof?"

"Tracks high on the ridge. Cigarette makings. That sort of thing."

"Today?"

Frank nodded. "She first saw them the day she found the Sinclairs. She says someone comes every day or two. They watch from above the cabin, to the east. The ones today were fresh."

"And why, pray tell, didn't she tell me?"

"The way you've been acting, why would she?"

Ace drew himself up like Frank expected the lord of the manor chastising a servant would do. Frank shook his head at the boy. He walked around the desk and settled himself on his chair. Mary had sewn a cushion for him. He pretended he only used it because it was from his wife, but he was secretly glad to ease his old bones. He sighed at Ace's indignant look.

"Son, I've been married longer than you've been alive. This is not the way to start a marriage." Frank held up a finger before Ace could

speaking. "You gonna beat her if she won't listen?"

"Good Lord, no! That's why she has to obey me." Ace curled his lip. "What kind of man do you think I am?"

"I don't know, Mr. Kenrick Langford. But Jessie looked mighty scared of you just now."

Ace exhaled in a blast of disgust. "I lost my temper with her a couple times when I thought she was a boy. It didn't seem to bother her at all. But now..."

Frank knew the reason. Jessie would not have given herself to Ace unless she loved him, even if she didn't realize it. Having the man she loved behave like one she hated would tear her apart. Ranger must not have told Ace much about her. He leaned across the desk.

"That tiny gal survived ten years with The MacDougal and his brutal sons. She knows what a raging man can do. She's been beaten, whipped and worked harder than a hired hand. She was damn near raped by a man she couldn't escape seeing every day after."

"Who?" Ace jumped to his feet "I'll kill him!"

Frank shook his head. "Jessie took care of him in her own way. She's had to take care of herself most of her life. Ranger, Ben, and Patrick did what they could, but most of her life, Jessie's been alone. Maybe she saw something in you which reminded her of all that."

Ace stared at the wall over Frank's head. Frank slurped his coffee, letting the boy work things through. Finally, Ace slumped on the stool. He rubbed his hands over his face. After a moment he snorted a laugh.

"If I even thought of harming Jessie, I'd be dead an hour after her brothers found me." He shuddered. "Better a bunch of Elliotts after me than Ross MacDougal. He'd take a week to skin and gut me." He frowned. "Why would Jessie think I'd hurt her?"

"She's lived with raging men. They don't think before they hit," said Frank quietly. "It may have been years ago, but Jessie's been beaten by big, loud men. Whatever you did scared the hell out of her. It's up to you to fix it."

Ace picked up the coffee. He held it more as something to do with his hands than drink.

“One more thing, son,” said Frank. “Ross taught Jessie everything he could about using knives. When she gets over her fear, she’ll be coming after you. And you know what they say about a woman’s revenge.” Frank leaned back in the chair. “I was you, I’d find her and apologize. You’ve seen how quick she is with that gelding knife.” He put his feet on the desk and settled himself for a nap.

Ace winced and pressed his knees together. Frank held back a smirk at the reaction. If Jessie hadn’t gelded Finan Junior when he tried to rape her, Ace’s balls were safe. Not that he’d tell the boy.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jessie stumbled out of the jail, pulling the door closed behind her. She untied Trouble's reins, grabbed the saddle horn with her right hand, and put her left foot in the stirrup. She was shaking so bad it took a couple of tries. She steadied herself then hopped, leveraging herself to mount. She leaned forward, ready to lift her right leg over the saddle. She stopped, weight on her left foot. She dismounted and rested her forehead against Trouble's neck.

What the heck was she doing? Racing back to the Double Diamond because a man told her to? She agreed to marry Mr.—or was it Lord—Kenrick Langford, but he'd given her neither a ring nor a date. And she never did actually say *yes*.

What would she get out of this marriage? Her horse, for one. She reached up a hand and scratched Trouble between his ears. "You're good, but you're no Nightwind." Trouble pulled off her hat and dropped it in the street so he could nibble her hair. She swooped her hat from the dirt, swatted Trouble with it on the shoulder, and squashed it back on her head.

Sex was second on her list. Ace, Sin, and Henry. Henry kept giving her looks to say one of these days he'd seduce her for hours before he'd let her come. Sin had an amazing tongue and fingers. A flush rushed up her chest and face. She liked it when he spanked her. It was nothing like a beating. That she would never allow. No, after he swatted her, he caressed her bottom, running his fingers between her cheeks and into her pussy. She clenched inside, thinking of how much she wanted more. Was this normal? His fingers felt so good in her bottom. Would his cock feel even better?

She looked across the street to Miss Lily's Parlor. She could always ask Lily. No, Lily was always dressed perfectly and acted as if she had everything under control. She, on the other hand, felt like she was never in control. Only on the back of a horse did she feel she knew what she was doing.

Beth and Amelia said she didn't have to be a witch like Louisa, or get walked all over like Sunbird. They were both strong women who got what they wanted. Not all the time, but often enough to make their lives comfortable.

Jessie swallowed, hard. Dammit, she was whining! Standing in front of the jail with her horse, she was complaining about her life instead of doing something about it!

So, Ace wanted her to haul her butt back to the ranch? Too bad.

She looked up the street. What else could she do?

Ace might head to the mercantile after leaving the jail, so that was out. She knew her brothers didn't want her to go past the banker's fancy house. That left the hotel. Her stomach rumbled in agreement.

"Come on, Trouble. You're going behind the hotel while I stuff my stomach full of pie."

She tugged gently on the reins. Trouble followed her to the horse trough and drank deeply. She waved back at a small boy sitting in the shade of the huge house going up between the jail and the mercantile. Smythe's house. The man who lost the Double Diamond to Ace in a card game. The one who might have had the Sinclairs killed. He wasn't in town, but had he sent someone to watch their ranch?

When Trouble lifted his head she crossed the wide street, avoiding the fresh horse manure in the wide street. She checked for rattlers as she walked in the long, dry grass between the hotel and Nora Dawes' home. She tied him in the shade behind the hotel and climbed the outside stairs. She might as well use the privy, and there was no way she'd use the one on the bottom. Imagine hearing something drop or whiz past on the other side of the boards, just inches behind your head?

She washed up and entered the hotel. She'd use the back stairs to the dining room in case Ace was in front. She grabbed the square newel post with her left hand and took a step down.

"Well, well. Jessie Elliott. Just the lass I was lookin' fer."

She froze, every hair on her body alert. She stepped back up to the landing and turned. Finan MacDougal, fists on hips, blocked the hallway. She braced, ready to run if he lifted his hand.

"Dinna fear, Jessie. I will nae hurt ye."

"What are you doing here?"

He gave her a theatrical look of surprise that wouldn't have fooled a child. "Do ye nae remember?"

"What are you doing in Tanner's Ford?" she repeated, emphasizing each word.

"Why, lookin' fer me wife, of course."

"Good luck finding one. I hear Baldy's got some women living behind his place who might do. Don't invite me to the wedding."

He laughed, deep and loud. She backed up a step, just in case. The only times she'd heard Fin laugh was when someone was hurt, or about to be. But this laugh was different. So was the rest of him. His red, bushy hair, beard, and moustache were trimmed. It made his eyes look less like a pig. He wore a clean black suit coat and pants. And his boots...

"Your boots are clean!"

"I told ye, Jessie. I'm here fer me wife. And ye'll nae need an invitation to the weddin'."

He pulled at his collar while he looked her over. She wore the same thing she'd put on the night before, when she stormed over to the MD Connected. That wasn't a crime, but it was also the same clothes she'd worn since she'd changed out of her yellow dress a few hundred miles to the east. Trouble had munched on her hat, and her hair, many times since.

"Would ye like to sup with me?"

She choked, his startling question catching her halfway through a

swallow.

“Fer auld times, and new,” he said. “I come all this way to see ye.”

She caught her breath while he waited. He knew better than to help her by patting her on the back. She wore only four knives today, but each was honed to perfection. There was also her pistol, something he lacked in his fancy suit.

“Why should I trust you? And how did you know I was here?”

He held his arms out, away from his sides. The hallway was extra wide, but his arms almost touched the walls. Though he was the shortest of the Elliott and MacDougal males at just under six feet, he was wide, red, and loud. And mean.

“Yer Aunt, Miss Jessamine Bonham, said ye took the Bride Train.” He pulled at his collar. “What did ye do with that yeller dress yer aunt nae approved of?”

“You went to Virginia?”

“Aye. Did ye think The MacDougal would have ye return all by yer lonesome?”

“I didn’t think he cared.”

“He cares about ye. So do I.” He gestured politely at the stairs. “At least a cuppa tea?”

Something was very wrong, but she couldn’t figure out what. The best way to find out was to listen to him talk. To be correct, that would mean listening to him boast. She was hungry, and if she could get him to pay, so much the better.

“Are you buying me dinner?”

He smiled. It wasn’t quite as revolting as she’d imagined.

“Aye.”

“Fine.” She nodded. “But you go down first.”

She caught the eye twitch that said he didn’t like it, but he tilted his head in a nod and stomped down the stairs. She waited for him to go down six steps before she followed. Once they reached the ground floor and there were other people around, she relaxed enough to hold

her shoulders back.

They caused a stir as they entered the dining room. Fin looked a lot like Gillis but was five inches shorter. Many years under the Texan sky was not good for such white skin. Instead of four years older than Gillis, he looked ten. He also carried more weight, much of it around his belly. Since she hadn't yet been in town, few would know her.

"Well, if it isn't Jessie Elliott, all grown up," said Doc. She'd met him when he came to examine the Sinclairs. He leaned back and looked at the man beside her. "And you have got to be a MacDougal."

"Finan MacDougal, this is Doctor Henley." Jessie wasn't sure if she wanted the entire room to know who she was, and with whom, but it was too late now. Heat crept up her collar at the rumblings around the room.

"Your father and Sunbird are well?"

Fin nodded. "Would ye like te join us?"

"Would you mind, Jessie?"

"Please!"

It would give Fin someone to talk at while she ate. The distraction worked well. Fifteen minutes later she pushed back her plate with a sigh.

"Sure ye dinna want another piece of peach pie, sweetheart?"

Fin's voice rolled over the room. Jessie shook her head in response, and then froze. Doc's fork stopped halfway to his mouth.

"What did you say?" Jessie slid a knife into her palm.

He smiled with his mouth. It didn't reach his eyes. "Is it nae right te call ye sweetheart? After all, ye are me fiancée." He stood up as she gaped. He tapped his spoon against the crockery. "I'd like te announce that Miss Jessie Elliott has agreed to be my bride. I'd invite ye te the weddin', but 'twill be held in Texas. Mayhaps ye'd like te join me fer a whiskey? I've got a few bottles in my rooms."

The roaring in Jessie's ears wasn't all caused by the men in the room. She started when Fin's big hands grabbed her out of her chair and lifted her high. He held her arms so she could not use her knife.

She caught the gleam in his eye before his mouth descended. She used her knee on his belly instead. He winced but didn't let her go.

"That's a lie! Take your hands off me!" Her voice was too muffled by his chest to go far.

"Aw, sweetheart. No need to be shy." The men nearby guffawed.

"Put her down, MacDougal."

Fin looked at Doc, considering for a moment. He let Jessie go, but not before squeezing her arms so hard she'd be purple by night. Congratulations rang out all over the room. Fin, after one last warning look, swept out of the room. Those eager for free whiskey followed him up the back stairs.

"It's not true!" she yelled. The men who heard her laughed as if it was a great joke.

"We'd better get you back to the Rocking E," said Doc. "Shall we go out the back?"

Jessie nodded. She pressed her hands over her rebelling stomach. Doc escorted her outside. She took a breath of air, hoping it would work. She slapped her hand over her mouth as she ran into the privy.

"It's me," said Doc's calm voice when she'd finished retching. She used the damp handkerchief he handed her.

"I am not ever going to speak to, much less marry that...that..."

"Disgusting mudsill blowhard? Four-flusher? Hard case?"

She nodded. "All of that, and more." She blinked hard. "He followed me to Virginia, and then here. What does he want?"

"You."

"But why?"

"I think you know the answer."

She turned away. "He wants to hurt me. After I almost gelded him, he—"

"You what?" Doc laughed.

"It was Louisa's wedding. He didn't think I'd wear a knife with my dress. He...attacked me. I, well." She shrugged. "I did what I had to."

“Good for you. I wish more women would attack the men who try to hurt them.”

He smiled proudly at her. Tears leaked out. He pulled her into his arms. She rested her head on his chest.

“I’m sure I saw Trace and Beth in town,” said Doc. “Let’s go find them.”

She nodded agreement. Trace would keep her safe. Seeing Fin reminded her of how frightened she’d been. That night, and every moment after. Only when she got to Virginia did she relax. But she always, always, wore knives. They wanted to put her back into skirts. She wouldn’t be able to run, or ride, or fight. First Ace threatened her, then Fin. When would it end?

Chapter Twenty-Two

By the time Ace thought things through, Frank was snoring. He admired the way the older man could balance like that and sleep. Frank rested his feet on the desk with his chair at the right angle. The wall supported his head.

Frank was right. Something about Jessie made him lose control. If she was a man, he could respect her. She was smart, observant, a bloody hard worker and—he dropped his head back and sighed. And he wanted to make her scream his name as he pounded into her. Every bloody day and half the night.

Why did this cantankerous pixie with a mouth to match make him want to strangle, spank, and cherish her, all at once?

Henry said the reason he had eight older siblings was his parents loved each other so much. Ace didn't visit Henry often because of the constant uproar of his five sisters and three brothers, but the Baron and Baroness often touched each other. Nothing more than her hand on his shoulder, or a quick pat on her bottom and a wink as the Baron passed. Looks that promised what they'd be doing soon after dinner. Henry would gag and roll his eyes, but it made Ace wonder what he'd missed.

Now he knew.

Did he love Jessie? He gave a mental shrug. It didn't matter. They would marry no matter what. And Jessie had to obey him, or they'd never be able to live in Tanner's Ford. He enjoyed how Beth and Amelia laughed and bantered at home, but their husbands would never tolerate it in town. Trace would never have to beat Beth because she would always treat him with respect in town.

To have a wife openly speak against him, especially on the main street in town, meant Ace would have to beat Jessie. That's what the men did on his brother's estate when their wives even thought of speaking back. It sickened him. The men often watched, some calling out encouragement, but the women turned away. Once a man lost that respect, he had to move away. No one would speak with him or do business. His wife would be shunned, his children ridiculed.

This was why he insisted Jessie behave like a proper wife—he could never lift his hand to her. If she sassed him, and he didn't put her in her place, they could not stay and be accepted. But he couldn't leave Tanner's Ford and start again elsewhere.

Jessie was smart. She would understand when he explained it to her.

Ace quietly closed the door on the snoring sheriff and stepped onto the boardwalk. Jessie would be home by now, likely scrubbing tack. He noticed she did that when upset.

A wagon rolled past with Trace at the reins. Ace returned the genuine smile that Beth shone on him. They stopped in front of the mercantile. He followed, wanting to check his credit at the store. The wedding would cost a bit, but the Double Diamond would pay.

Ace watched, feet slowing, as Trace lifted Beth down. He did it by inches, her body rubbing against his all the way. Ace imagined doing the same to Jessie, making sure she felt every inch of him. Even better if they were naked. He would catch her pussy with his cock on the way past. He stopped walking as he fought his rising reaction.

The couple stared at each other as if nothing else existed. When her feet touched the boardwalk Trace leaned in for a kiss. Beth returned it, just as deep and thorough. When they broke apart, both were breathing hard. So was Ace.

"Patsy might have that lamp that I want," said Beth. She fluttered her eyes at Trace.

He stuck his fists on his hips and shook his head. "I said no, wife."

"I want it, husband, and I'm going to get it." She stuck her finger

into his chest.

“You’ll get it, all right.” He caught her hand and held it.

Ace’s mouth went dry as he waited for Trace to put Beth in her place. He never thought Trace would hurt Beth, yet she’d done something inexcusable. But Beth yanked her hand back, jammed her own fists on her hips, and glared back at him. Ace watched in silence and confusion.

“Three days without clothes,” growled Trace, staring down at Beth.

“Three!” She gasped. “How dare you suggest such a thing!” She pouted, narrowing her eyes and glaring back.

They stood like that for a few moments, neither giving ground. Ace noticed that many others also watched the exchange. Most of them, men and women alike, seemed amused rather than upset.

“One day, and no outside bathing!” She spat the words at him.

Instead of lifting his fist to her, Trace relaxed and leaned a shoulder against the wagon. He looked at her from toes to bonnet as if considering every inch of what was under her dress. A smile played around his mouth. Beth bristled at his nonchalant attitude.

“Two days, apple fritters, and an outdoors session,” he demanded.

She crossed her arms, lifting her breasts in the process. Trace didn’t miss the obvious ploy, seeming even more amused. She cupped her rounding belly, rubbing it gently. She tilted her head and fluttered her eyes at her husband again.

“One day, apple fritters, and no outdoors,” she replied.

“Two days, apple fritters, and a spanking,” he said quietly. “Take it or leave it, wife.”

Beth’s color was high, and she opened her mouth to breathe. The day was warming up, but Ace didn’t think the beads of perspiration on her upper lip were all due to the heat surrounding them.

“I’ll take it, husband,” she replied demurely.

They stared at each other for another minute with silent messages sent and received. When Trace winked she turned, hips swaying, and

sauntered toward the mercantile. She winked at Ace as she passed, a wide, satisfied smile on her face.

Ace was close enough to the store to hear her delighted laugh as the door closed. Shaking his head, he walked over to Trace, who looked at the closed door with a bemused expression.

“What was that about?”

Trace turned to him, smiling. “That’s how a husband keeps his wife in line. We both get what we want.”

“But, everyone heard her talk back. Doesn’t that make everyone in town lose respect for you?”

Trace started to laugh until he realized Ace was serious. “We have got to talk.” He tilted his head. “I’ll buy you a drink and give you a few secrets of married life. If you’re marrying my sister, you’ll need to know a few things.”

* * * *

Trace lifted his glass of beer. “To a happy wife, which means a happy life.”

He watched Ace consider the toast for a moment before almost reluctantly lifting his glass. He waited until Ace’s shoulders relaxed a bit before continuing. Baldy’s Saloon was fairly quiet this early in the day. In the corner a greenhorn was losing his gold dust playing faro with Nate Potts and a couple of his cronies. Nate hadn’t looked up, but Trace knew the man was aware of everything in the room. So was Trace.

Ace stared at his beer for a moment then took a gulp. He held the glass for a moment before setting it down. “Jessie’s your sister. How do I make her happy without losing everything?”

“You want her happy?”

“Hell yes!” Ace finished his glass of beer and slammed it down on the table. “I did not want a wife until we had more money, but it’s too late for that. Jessie will just have to wait a few years before I can buy

her pretty things. That means she won't be happy. Unhappy women make life miserable for the men around them. I'll be grateful if you can tell me how to change that."

"Jessie doesn't care about pretty things. Just keep doing the same as when you thought she was a boy."

"But she'll be my wife, not a hired hand."

"So?" Trace frowned. "All she ever wanted was to be a cowboy, riding Nightwind. If she gets enjoyment from sharing your bed, all the better."

Ace leaned forward. "A proper wife doesn't dress like a man and ride a horse. She behaves with decorum, meeting the needs of her husband and family."

Trace snorted into his beer. "I suppose you also expect Jessie to be obedient. You want her to lie down with her legs spread and eyes closed, thinking of Mother England while she does her wifely duty each night."

Ace flushed. "A wife should be obedient, yes. I'd hoped she'd keep some of the passion we shared, though."

Trace thought of what he and Beth just acted out on the main street. Beth had plenty of passion, but he had to keep stirring her to keep it going. Neither of them gave a damn what the townsfolk thought of them. Maybe that was the problem. Ace cared too much about what others thought. He leaned forward.

"How the hell can a woman show passion at night if her husband stomps it out of her during the day?" He shook his head. "I don't know who the hell put those ideas in your head about having a 'proper' wife, but a woman like that won't survive out here. If you care how others judge you and want an obedient little nothing for a wife, then hand Jessie over to your partners and take your sorry ass back home."

"A man has to have respect, or he's not a man."

"Damn right!" Trace banged his empty glass on the table. "But first he has to respect himself and his family. Who cares what

strangers think?”

“My father is an Earl. I was taught one has to be held in respect.”

“Nobody cares if your father is the king of England!” Trace dropped his voice and sighed. “Any respect you get out here, you earn. I paid my dues and then some.” He rubbed his neck, the scars covered by the handkerchief he always wore in town. “I’m proud of my son’s grandmother even though she runs the finest whorehouse east of the Missouri. I’m proud my wife’s belly is swelling with my brother’s child. I don’t give a shit what anyone else thinks about it.”

Ace just blinked, but Trace thought he might be taking in at least some of it.

“Jessie loves the land. Since our parents died, she’s not had a home. She planned to live with Ranger on the Bitterroot, but he thought you and your partners would be better for her. We respect you for turning your back on futility and coming here. You beat that bastard Smythe at his own game and won your ranch. Ranger said he’s never seen Jessie so happy as when she was riding the Double D range all day. Was he wrong?”

Ace inhaled and looked away. “Where I come from men beat their wives if they don’t obey. If they don’t keep them in line, the other men refuse to speak with them or do business. I thought if I made her show me respect, I wouldn’t have to hurt her. I don’t ever want to hurt her.”

“Damn good thing because we’d stomp you into the ground.”

“That was made obvious the other night,” said Ace dryly. He rolled the empty beer glass in his hands as he thought. Trace let the silence grow.

“You saw Beth and me negotiating over that lamp?”

Ace nodded. He looked away, as if hiding something.

“I don’t give a shit whether she wants the lamp or not. We have the money, and she knows she can have anything she damned well wants.” He waited until Ace nodded understanding. “What she really wants is for me to prove, in public, that I want her. She knows I do,

but thinking she's making other women jealous, makes her horny. And making her horny makes me very happy." Trace smiled like a wolf. "So does knowing that damn near every man wishes he'd stood up to Big Joe and married her, instead of me having her."

"You really make her walk around naked as punishment for mouthing back at you? That doesn't sound like much."

Trace leaned back in his chair. His smile widened.

"Part of Beth's punishment is never knowing what's going to happen, or when. I choose the days she goes naked. Maybe someone shows up for a visit while I've got her on her back on the kitchen table. She knows I won't stop until I'm damn good and ready. And she's noisy when she comes."

Ace loosened his shirt collar and shifted in his chair.

"I might tell her to join me for a ride into the woods. She'll face me with her ass bare to the world, riding my cock." He leaned forward. "Sometimes I pretend to see someone in the distance. I wave and call out. She squawks like crazy!"

Ace licked his lips. "What you call punishment makes her hot for you."

Trace nodded. "The rule is, when she's naked like that, any of us can take her anywhere, anyhow. I make sure to remind Simon and Jack at breakfast that she's ready to provide dessert any time they like. And that spanking?"

Ace sat up. Trace smiled to himself. Wanting to put your hand on your woman's ass must be something they all shared.

"If I want to, Beth will get it in town, right in the wagon."

"You wouldn't spank her in public!"

"Not likely, but she doesn't know that, not for sure." Trace tilted his head toward the street. "Gillis did it to his wife, Prudence, one day. She was Amelia's older sister, may she rest in peace." Trace chuckled. "Luckily, she wore drawers because he hiked up her skirts and paddled her right in front of the hotel."

"What did she do?"

“Screeched like the sky was falling. Of course, that just brought a bigger audience. Sophie said it emptied the dining room in no time flat. Gil said he did it again as soon as they got on MD land. Prue was so wet she came twice before he put his cock in her.”

Trace smiled, remembering the first time he took Beth on Rocking E Ranch. The morning after their wedding and Beth was eager to learn. They both had a good idea that one of his brothers watched with a spyglass. Turned out it was Simon. Trace shook out his leg and shifted himself, taking advantage of the table to hide his need.

“I haven’t had a chance to paddle Jessie,” said Ace. “I don’t think she’d put up with it right now.”

“Men like us need women who are strong and passionate. If you try to turn Jessie into what you call a proper wife, you’ll kill her, day by day. Unless you act like a man she can respect, she won’t put up with you. And neither will we.”

He stood up, Ace a second behind.

“Thank you,” said Ace. He held out his hand. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Trace shook, each of them pressing hard. “Think fast or lose her,” he said.

“Any chance someone can bring Nightwind to the Double Diamond today? I don’t want Jessie to think she can’t have her horse unless she takes me as well.”

“As soon as I get Beth home, I’ll take care of it.”

Trace met Ace’s steady gaze. They were the same age, almost the same size, and wanted Jessie to be happy.

“I did what I thought was best. I hope she can forgive me.”

“Water under the bridge. Getting her horse back will make a big difference.”

“Should I be jealous?” Ace cracked a bit of a smile.

“What’s the harm in her riding her mare? Once she’s carrying your child she won’t be able to ride. Let her have some fun.” Trace

motioned to Baldy to bring whiskey to Ace. “Anything you need, let us know. We’re family.”

“I need Jessie back, but that’s my problem to solve.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Trace and Beth had heard Fin's news and instantly dismissed it. Anyone who believed Jessie would marry Fin MacDougal had spent too much time at the bottom of a bottle. But, just in case Fin grabbed her and hauled her in front of a priest, they wanted her safe on Elliott land.

Jessie, riding between Beth and Trace, felt surrounded by love. They stopped by the Double Diamond so Jessie could change. She scrambled out of her work clothes, washed quickly, and changed into the blouse and divided dress, pantalettes, drawers, and bonnet Amelia had given her. The blouse wouldn't have fit without the corset to hold her chest in, and the skirt was a bit long, but it would do. She climbed back into the wagon and settled beside Beth.

Fin's threat made her think again about what marriage to the Double Diamond meant. She wouldn't have to fear for her life, but she'd have a lifetime of drudgery. Cooking, cleaning, mending, making butter, growing vegetables, putting them up for the winter... She got exhausted thinking about it.

Put her on a horse in the heat of summer, snow of winter, or rain the other two seasons, and she was happy. Well, not necessarily happy, but at least fulfilled. Doing what she was good at, what filled her heart. She couldn't live like Sunbird, quietly meeting the needs of everyone but herself. Sunbird's husband and sons listened to her as much as they did the shadows on the walls.

She wasn't Sunbird, and Ace wasn't The MacDougal. When he stormed at her that morning, she'd forgotten it in her panic. Ace wouldn't beat her. Fin would.

But what did Ace mean about punishing her? MacDougals used fists, belts, and boots. She'd have to ask Amelia and Beth what their husbands did. She couldn't imagine Trace, Ross, or the others hitting a woman, or a child.

She, on the other hand, could retaliate physically. She could flay Ace alive or fill him like a pincushion from ten paces with her knives. She could trample him to death with her horse. No, she couldn't use Nightwind to hurt him. It might upset her baby girl. And her baby girl might already be growing a colt. If her mare had one from Emperor, and she was Ace's widow, she would own both animals. She smiled in satisfaction.

Poison would also work on Ace, and she was also a very good shot, with both pistol and rifle. And then there was roping. She could catch him outside and tie him up somewhere. Maybe to a post in the barn. She'd cut off his clothing and do whatever she wanted with him.

Amelia met them in the yard, smiling widely. Trace dropped the women off and continued on his way, saying he had chores to do but would be back later.

"Too bad Auntie took Daniel to the forest. He loves meeting new relatives, now that he's a MacDougal. Hope will sleep for another few hours, so it's just us," said Amelia. She smiled at Jessie. "You're wearing the riding dress I gave you."

"It's lovely, but I hate dresses and bonnets," declared Jessie. "I'd rather wear pants and a brimmed hat. But Ace says I have to act as a 'proper' wife, or he'll punish me."

"Ross says Ace is a stubborn fool to try and turn a hawk into a pigeon."

Jessie stood a little straighter. "He called me a hawk?"

Amelia nodded. "I forget what type."

A warm feeling cracked a bit of the ice around Jessie's heart. "Ross is one of my favorite brothers. He taught me all I know about knives." She frowned. "I'll need a couple small throwing knives that I can strap to my thigh under my dress. The ones I have are for

outside.”

“You’ll have to teach us how to do that,” said Beth. “Ross won’t.”

“And in return, tell Patsy to put it on my tab,” said Amelia. “I brought lots of dresses that are no use to me, so I sell them to Patsy. You, me, and Beth can buy anything we like and our men don’t need to know.”

“I have money,” said Jessie with a shrug. “Loads of it. But it’s staying in a certain bank back East. My husband isn’t getting a penny of it.”

Beth and Amelia looked at each other, then away.

“I pulled out a few dresses from my trunks in the bunkhouse,” said Amelia brightly. “I thought one of them might suit you for a wedding dress. Shall we go see?”

Though Jessie hated the thought of spending time on something so trivial, Amelia and Beth looked so eager she couldn’t say no. After all, what else did Jessie have to do? She’d let her sisters-in-law figure out the wedding details. Right now she felt like wearing a black sack as a wedding dress.

After Jessie tried on far too many dresses as the other two women told her to turn around and lift up her arms, Amelia finally led them into the house. Jessie stopped to look at a colored picture of mountains hanging on the wall. She peered closer.

“That’s one of my sister’s quilt pictures,” said Amelia. “She wasn’t strong enough to make big quilts, so she pieced together pictures.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” said Jessie. “It’s beautiful.”

“Amelia’s also an artist,” said Beth. “Wait until you see the beautiful pencil drawing she made of Trace holding James.”

“I just sketch,” said Amelia. “So, did you order that lamp you wanted?” asked Amelia as they entered the kitchen. Beth nodded, eyes shining. “What punishment did it cost you this time?”

“Two days without clothes, a batch of apple fritters, and a spanking.”

“Spanking?” Jessie squeaked the word. “You’ll let my brother *spank* you?”

Beth nodded with a wide smile. “And then I let him make it all better.” She and Amelia exchanged winks. Both laughed.

“You don’t wear clothes for two whole days?”

“I wear an apron when I’m cooking, of course, and cover myself when necessary so I don’t get injured. But the rest of the time, nothing but boots and a hat.”

“Outside?”

“Mmm,” sighed Beth. “I remember that first time, the morning after our wedding.”

Jessie looked from one sister-in-law to the other. Both had dreamy looks on their faces. Both rubbed their swelling bellies. Jessie wanted to look like that, but it wouldn’t happen with Ace. Sin, certainly, and maybe Henry, but not the man who would be her legal husband.

No, Ace would punish her far worse. The way he’d looked that morning, and again in the sheriff’s office, she’d be living almost the same way as in Texas. No, Ace would never be as bad as Fin, and she had the protection of her brothers here. Some protection, forcing her to do something she’d sworn would never happen!

What was the worst Ace could do to her? She sat straighter. If he hurt her, the Elliots and MacDougals would hurt him worse. He’d watched her cut the bull calves, turning them into steers with the flick of a wrist. A husband’s balls wouldn’t be much different, and Ace knew it.

“I’m going to get Nightwind,” said Jessie, “and I don’t care what happens. After all, anything Ace does to me will set my brothers after him.”

“He could spank you,” said Beth and Amelia together. They looked at each other and laughed.

“I don’t understand why you think it’s funny.”

Amelia sobered. She walked over and put her arm around Jessie.

“Do you know why Ace is behaving like this? I don’t know how

things are done in England, but I remember my father. He believed if he wasn't in total control of his wife and daughters, he wouldn't be respected. Without respect, he couldn't do business."

"How can I respect Ace when he can't do *half* the things I can? He can't rope as well, or push cattle, or—"

"Can he make you scream his name when you come? Is he working hard to learn more, to take care of you and your family?"

"Well, yes, but—" Jessie jumped when the kitchen door opened. She thought it was Ace, tracking her down again, but it was Trace. She hadn't heard the rattle of the wagon. Had he listened through the open window?

"Give Ace a chance, Jessie," Trace said, confirming her worry that he'd heard. He caught Beth and gave her a quick kiss. He massaged her bottom with his hand. She waggled it against his hand, encouraging him.

"Ace chose to leave everyone but two friends behind and come to this new land," said Trace. "But he brought his past with him. Just like you did."

"What do you mean?" Jessie bristled at his accusatory look.

"You are neither Louisa nor Sunbird. You are Jessamine Bonham Elliott, soon to be Langford. And right now you are making everyone miserable."

"Me! He's the one who—"

"Who's trying to be the best husband he knows how."

"By making me marry him just because we got naked, or to get my horse back? He wants to keep me like Sunbird!"

Trace crouched on his haunches beside her. He stared her in the face. She hadn't been this close to him since she left for Texas. Before he was roped and dragged, his beautiful voice broken. Before Beth. But he was still her oldest brother, the one who stayed behind and kept Simon and Jack alive when the rest of them were forced to leave with the MacDougals.

"Where Ace comes from, if a wife speaks back to her husband in

public, he would beat her to make sure he had the respect of other men. Ace doesn't want to hurt you, but he also needs the ranch to work. He thought making you obey him will protect you from him having to beat you."

"What?" gasped Beth.

"That's ridiculous!" said Jessie.

"Is it?" Trace raised an eyebrow. "What if you married Finan MacDougal and you even thought of saying no to him?"

Chills raced through her body. She gulped. "He'd kill me," she whispered.

"Not until he and Hugh got tired of raping and beating you."

"Oh, my Godfathers!" cried Amelia. She staggered. Trace quickly stood, catching her before she fell. She rested a hand on her belly. "Unless I have a son before their father dies, Finan will own our ranch!" cried Amelia. "And if he'd do that to you—"

"Shh," soothed Trace. "No way that son of a bitch is throwing you off your land. With the Double Diamond in the family, once Ben gets here, there'll be twelve of us to stop him. Ben's a lawyer now, so maybe he counts double." He patted her hand. "That makes at least fifteen good men if the Circle C helps out, and I expect they will. Add the other ranches, Miss Lily, Rosa, Sophia McLeod, and Frank Chambers..." Trace cracked a smile at Amelia. "If we need more, there's lots of other single men who'll do dang near anything for your and Beth's home cooking. And speaking of cooking, someone owes me some apple fritters." He turned his head toward Beth

"I haven't forgotten," she said, rolling her eyes at Trace.

Trace made sure Amelia was settled. He turned back to Jessie. "Come here, Punkin." He hauled her into his arms and hugged her like a bear. She clung to him as if she was still a child, eager for her big brother's love.

"Give the man another chance, Jess. He thought he was protecting you the only way he knew how. I had a talk with him and explained a few things."

"I'll give him twenty-four hours," she said. She knew she pouted, but she didn't care. "After that, I'm coming for Nightwind."

Trace set her on her feet. He curled his finger to her and pointed out the window. She remembered that look from long, long ago. Christmas morning and there was a present under the tree for her.

"What is it?"

"I guess this is Ace's first apology. He says she's all yours. And her foal."

Jessie looked out the window. A regal black horse, white star between her ears, waited in the yard.

"Nightwind?"

The horse pricked her ears. She tossed her head, knowing the voice. Jessie left everything behind and ran out the house.

"Nightwind! Oh, my baby girl!"

She threw her arms around the glossy black neck, tears flowing. The horse nudged her shoulder, making her laugh. Jessie stuck her left foot into the stirrup and landed in the saddle. Not bothering to shorten the stirrups, she pressed her knees. The two of them raced away.

"That horse means a lot to Jessie," said Beth, watching them ride as one.

"Ranger says Nightwind is the only thing that kept Jessie sane. She helped birth the colt and fought to keep it alive the first night. The MacDougal let her keep it because the colt was a runt, and he thought she'd die. Jessie hid her away so he wouldn't know any different. She raised Nightwind, spending a part of every day with her. When she was forced to go to Virginia, she gave her to Ranger. I think that, deep down, Jessie thinks that horse is the only one who really loves her."

"Ace, Sin, and Henry have a lot to prove to beat the love of a good horse," said Beth.

"I need to borrow your wagon," said Trace to Amelia. "I want my wife on my land, naked, so I can prove I'm better than a horse."

"Help yourself," said Amelia, smiling.

"I will. And Amelia?"

“Yes?”

“When I passed Gil, he told me to say he and Nev need you out in the meadow. He said to bring a blanket and some sweet oil.”

Amelia’s face turned pink. She gave an absent wave to Beth and Trace and scurried to gather what she needed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I’m going with you to rescue Molly Sinclair.”

“Absolutely not!” Ace jabbed his finger at Jessie. “You will stay with Beth and Amelia.”

Jessie slipped her slim knife from her sleeve into her right hand. She held the tip and dug a sliver out of her left palm. When she was satisfied she raised her left hand, palm facing toward herself. She inspected it nonchalantly.

“You see a ring on this hand, Mr. Kenrick bloody Langford?”

“Jessie, it’s not safe—”

Though she was surrounded by five large brothers from the Rocking E, three loyal cousins from the MD Connected, three lovers from the Double Diamond, and another three big men from the Circle C, she put her fists on her hips and read them the riot act.

“You’re not my husband, or my father. I found Molly’s family, and I’m going to be the one who tells her that.” She met his icy glare with one of her own.

“Actually, it would be a good idea to have a woman in the room when you burst in,” said Sin before Gillis could build up to a roar. “We have to get Molly out quickly and quietly. She’ll be frightened, and Jessie might be able to calm her.”

Jessie snorted. The frowns on Trace’s and Ace’s faces would curdle milk. But Sin was right, and they knew it. According to Frederick Smythe, the Sinclairs sold their ranch to him over a year ago. Miss Lily said Molly had only appeared in the Bannack City brothel about ten days earlier. They were still trying to sell her as a virgin, but she might be far too frightened to go anywhere with a man.

Either that or her captors had hurt her so much she'd be fearful of leaving in case she was brought back and worse happened.

In either case, whether they wanted it or not, Jessie was part of this rescue.

"What if I hire Molly for my virgin son for the night," asked Henry. "I can insist on waiting outside the room to let Jessie have his time. Meanwhile, Jessie can get Molly dressed in a set of her boy clothes."

Luke nodded. "Gabe and I will come in through the attic when the fight starts. If Molly's calm and looks like a boy, we can walk away once we're back on the ground. How long do you think you'll be able to keep fighting?"

Trace looked at Ace while Ranger checked out Sin.

"I think we can keep the momentum going for long enough," growled Trace. He flexed his hand open and closed as if preparing for a punch. "You game?"

"It would be my utmost pleasure to convince you of a few important things," murmured Ace. "This way, we won't need to meet by Baldy's Saloon and waste a day showing you up."

Ranger and Sin sized each other up. Sin topped Ranger by three inches and was eager to prove he was worth Jessie's attention. Ranger, however, had to show he could protect his sister and keep up the proud Elliott name. No one had bested an Elliott in a fair fight over the years, and Ranger wanted to keep the record unblemished.

Jessie rolled her eyes at the posturing between her brothers and lovers. Luke winked and Gabe nodded solemnly.

"I wouldn't mind joining in for some fun," said Ross. Nevin nodded.

"Ye are the cavalry," said Gillis, "ready to step in if yer needed upstairs." He glowered at Ace and Sin. "If ye stay alert, 'twouldn't matter if ye broke a few heads."

"Jessie and I will leave immediately and get settled," said Henry.

"You've got enough gold?"

“Yes,” said Henry. He patted his pocket where he’d placed the bag of gold dust Trace had given him. Ten ounces, two hundred dollars. “I hope this doesn’t take all your gold.”

“It’s just crushed rocks,” said Trace. He leaned forward to emphasize his point. “When you dicker for Molly, make it look good. Let them think you really want to do this for your son but that virgin is so damned expensive. Jessie will poke you to say he wants Molly no matter what. Since you’re going to get to use her as well, it’s not a bad price for a nice piece of tail.” He wiped his fingers over his mouth as if to wash away the ugly words. “Use the whole thing if you need to. That little girl’s life is worth it.”

“We can’t save them all,” said Ross quietly. “But we’re going to save Molly.”

The men nodded solemnly, knowing Ross lost his young cousin to rape and murder. Though three of her attackers were dead, Ross kept an eye out for the fourth. He swore the last would take a very long time to die.

A few more final details and Jessie climbed up beside Henry. He slapped the reins and the horses started off. Jessie held on as the empty wagon rattled along. They were to bring back a load of fine wine and brandy for Miss Lily’s Parlor. There was a false bottom where Molly would be hidden. Jessie knew if Molly went in there, she’d go as well so the girl would feel safer.

Lily and Rosa told everyone not to expect Molly to trust anyone for a long, long time, if ever. Most of the town would do whatever they could to help the girl find as normal a life as possible. Some, led by Eudora Jennett, the banker’s righteous wife, already spouted it was Molly’s fault.

Molly would stay with Lily and Rosa for as long as she wished. She would see no prurient, pitying looks there.

* * * *

Henry flashed his poke while he paid for his drinks. He insisted his shy boy drink as well, though it was beer to Henry's whiskey. He pointed out various fancy ladies to his son, who shook his head each time. Meanwhile, Trace and Ranger settled with their backs to the near wall.

Jessie gasped when a pretty girl with long, blond hair walked along the balcony at the top of the stairs. A large man stood behind her, one hand on her shoulder. It might look as if he just rested it there, but Jessie saw how the thin fabric of the girl's white dress crumpled under the strain. The girl smiled and waved.

"Poppa, I want that one!" Jessie poked "his" father and pointed to Molly.

Henry laughed and slapped Jessie on the shoulder. "Knew you'd find one ya liked. That's my boy!" He grinned and nodded as if he was half-sloshed. He looked around for someone in charge.

"My boy's fourteen. About time he lost his cherry," he yelled. "That girl the virgin I heered about? I want him to pop a cherry his first time." He slapped Jessie again. "Get two cherries in one, eh, boy?" He laughed at his own joke.

An enormous woman draped in deep red satin waved her hand to the bartender in some sort of signal. She smiled like a spider spinning a web and ran her fingernail under Jessie's chin. Jessie jerked her head away from the claw. She pressed her hand on her stomach. The stench of the men around them was bad enough without the woman's attempt to use strong perfume to cover her smell.

"Virgins are mighty dear," replied the hard-eyed owner. "It'll cost you a hundred dollars in gold for that cherry."

"A hundred dollars?" Henry gasped and frowned at the same time.

"But she's worth it. Don't you think?"

She pointed to the stairs. Molly smiled down at Henry. Her smile was wide but forced. The man behind her moved his arm, and Molly winced but smiled again and waved at Jessie.

"She's real pretty," said Jessie. She stared, gawking with her

mouth open as she had for her first few days in Virginia.

“You want your son’s first time to be special,” purred the madam. She tugged on Henry’s arm. “He’ll thank you the rest of his life.” She trilled the fake laugh Jessie had been forced to practice. “He may never find another virgin in his entire life.”

Henry stared up at Molly and rubbed his stubbled chin. He looked at Jessie, who gave a pleading look.

“Well, if we have her for the night, I can use her as well.” He shifted his eyes to the madam and smiled. “After the boy has her, I can show her what a man can do to make a woman really smile.”

“If you’re both having her, it’s another fifty dollars.”

Henry stuck his hand in his pocket. He fingered the bag of gold dust, looking up at Molly.

“She sure is pretty. You sure she’s a virgin?”

“Yes, but she won’t be after your son is finished with her.”

“If he’s my son, he won’t be finished until breakfast.”

Henry laughed, loud and strong as if it was the best joke. Jessie dropped her head and shuffled her feet, pretending shy eagerness. She made sure her coat was closed to hide the lack of erection which every man in the place likely sported. Henry was hard and eager, thanks to Jessie’s handy encouragement before they went in the saloon.

“One hundred and fifty dollars for both of you. All night long.” The madam tilted her head. The man turned Molly around and pushed her through the curtain that masked the hallway to the rooms.

“Nobody better wake us up until breakfast,” said Henry. “I been waiting a long time for a woman.”

He pulled the bag of dust out of his pocket. The madam nodded and led them to the bar. They weighed out the gold dust, leaving little in the bag. Henry pretended to be too drunk and eager to notice the scales were fixed.

Familiar faces came through the open door to the street. If she didn’t know her brothers were good men, she’d be afraid to get near

them. Ace and Sin strolled into the saloon as if they owned it, sneering like the upper-crust aristocrats they had been. Ace wore his top hat. Lily warned him it would be destroyed, but he said he had no more use for it. Sin was dressed as a dude as well, though not with the same elegance. She blinked when the sheriff followed behind. Frank Chambers winked at her. He placed his hand over the spot he usually wore his badge.

“Fer Christ’s sake, boys, look what’s crawled into a real man’s saloon!” Ranger pointed at Ace, who sneered back.

No one paid attention as Jessie and Henry went upstairs. They passed through the curtain and into a long hallway. A narrow turkey carpet ran past the closed doors. They walked all the way to the end. The man waited outside the last door. The madam opened the door and let Jessie in.

“Molly, dear, there’s a young man to see you. He and his father want to get to know you better. You’re going to be very nice to them, aren’t you?”

Jessie barely heard the whispered “yes.” Someone shoved her between the shoulders. She stumbled forward, almost falling. Henry and the madam laughed. The door shut behind them. Jessie heard Henry settling on the floor outside the door.

“Don’t be too long in there, Junior,” called Henry. “I’m eager for my turn.”

Jessie waited for it to be quiet before she looked up. Molly stared back for a second then dropped her eyes. She was a bit taller than Jessie, but then, most people were.

“Do you want me to take my dress off now?” Molly’s voice shook along with her body.

Jessie put her finger to her mouth and raised her eyebrows. She looked around the room. A small window, barred, over a bed with only a white bottom sheet. A small table with a white tablecloth and porcelain lamp covered in roses. A washbasin and ewer, also with pink roses, with a white folded towel beside it.

"I'm not going to hurt you," whispered Jessie. She slipped off her duster and hat, dropping them to the floor.

Molly backed up a step. Her eyes were wide, her chin trembling.

"I'm a girl, too, Jessie Elliott. You know my brother, Simon Elliott. He said he used to pull your braid and give you and your brother peppermint sticks when he saw you at the Tanner's Ford Mercantile. Henry's not my father, he's the partner of my fiancé. We're going to take you home."

Molly gasped. She backed up a step and shook her head. "They'll hurt me lots and lots if I try to escape. One girl tried it last week. She screamed for hours." She bit her trembling lip and swallowed. "There's this man who likes to hurt girls. Sarah said one paid a lot of money to do whatever he wanted. He beat her to death."

"Then we'd better get you out of here fast."

Jessie undid her top shirt and pulled it off. She sat on the floor to take off her boots and then shucked the second pair of pants she wore over her own. Because the clothes were a bit big, they'd cover Molly. Since Jessie's feet were small, Molly would have to go barefoot, but lots of boys did in summer.

"I'll turn my back while you put on these clothes. In a few minutes there's going to be a big fight downstairs. There'll be lots of smashing and yelling and all. That's when the others will come in through the roof. They'll take us out that way."

She held out the clothes to Molly. She made sure to stay back, following Rosa's orders. Downstairs a deep bellow rang out. Something large made of glass was smashed.

"That's my big brother, Trace," said Jessie proudly.

"I know the Elliots," whispered Molly. She reached out her hand. Jessie handed her the shirt and pants.

"Well, you've got them and the MacDougals and more all here to rescue you."

Molly pulled the pants on under her dress. She stuffed the dress into the pants and put the shirt on over.

“We can’t go without Sarah,” she cried. “She’s next door, locked up.” Molly stared face on at Jessie for the first time. “I won’t leave her behind!”

“Fine by me,” said Jessie. As soon as Molly buttoned her pants, Jessie opened the door a crack.

“All good?”

“Yes,” she replied, “but we have to take Sarah as well. She’s next door.”

Jessie squeaked when a man smashed through the door at the end of the hall. Ross appeared, then Nevin. Luke Frost followed, grinning like a wild man. The scar crossing his face, white against his red face, made him look even fiercer. Gabe came behind, moving slower as he was so much bigger. He looked ready and eager to kill something.

Molly knocked on the wall. “Sarah? It’s okay. We’re being rescued!” She stood behind Jessie and pointed to the huge lock on the door next to hers. “She’s in there.”

Gabe pushed the others aside. He stood right next to the door and rested his hand on the knob.

“Miss Sarah?”

Jessie hadn’t met the man, or heard his voice before. He was even bigger than Sin. His voice sounded almost like a foghorn, deep and strong.

“Ma’am, I’m Gabriel Downey. I’ll be knocking this door down so you move to the corner near Miss Molly’s room. Understand?”

He didn’t wait more than a few seconds before lifting his leg and slamming his boot into the door right by the lock. It smashed open. He counted to three and then walked through.

* * * *

Sarah Unsworth wrapped a quilt around her thin dress. She crouched in the corner of the room, following the orders of the deep voice. She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering in the heat.

She jumped and screamed when the door splintered. A huge man, far bigger than the one who threatened to hurt her, ducked his head and stepped through.

His shaggy, dark brown hair touched his shoulders. With his faded clothing and dark tan he looked like a bear wearing a hat. He whipped it off, holding it in both hands in front of him like a preacher. His thick lips parted, and white teeth smiled down at her, a shy smile that reached his eyes. He held out his hand, more like a paw with fingers instead of claws.

Molly pushed past him and into the room. She wore pants and a shirt.

“Come on, Sarah. I know these people. They won’t hurt us.”

Sarah pulled herself to her feet. She crossed her arms to hide her breasts, almost visible through the thin shirt that was all they allowed her. The big man didn’t move, nor did his smile falter. He kept his eyes on hers, unlike all the others. His hand was about the size of her head. Downstairs something else crashed. A few women screamed, but they followed it with laughter. She knew how to tell fun from fearful screams by now.

She reached out her hand and took a step. The man nodded encouragingly but didn’t rush her. Another step.

“May I carry you, Miss Sarah? I’m afraid we have to take you out through the roof. It might be a bit frightening, but I’ll protect you with my life. I swear it on the graves of my mother and sisters. We’ve got a blanket to wrap you in so you won’t get chilled.”

She looked into his dark eyes. They both knew the real reason for the blanket. Another man moved to his side. This one had a huge scar across his face. To others he might look frightening, but she’d learned that handsome men were the most dangerous. They promised you love and marriage, and then sold you to a whorehouse. They laughed as they counted the gold and then rode away.

“I’m Luke Frost, and I’d be honored to protect you as well, ma’am. But we have to leave now. Can you trust Gabe to carry you?”

He tossed a light blanket at her. She caught it and wrapped it over her shoulders and around her body. It wasn't much, but it provided more dignity than she'd had in weeks.

She stepped close to Gabriel. He smelled clean, of horses and leather and yellow soap. No perfume or hair oil like that horrid man. She nodded. He gently put his hands under her shoulders and thighs and lifted her like a doll. He followed a tall, dark-skinned man carrying Molly, dressed as a boy. Molly turned her head and smiled at Sarah. The first real smile she'd seen Molly give. Sarah grasped Gabriel's vest, closed her eyes, and snuggled against his chest. She didn't feel totally safe, but for the first time in weeks, she wasn't terrified.

She was carefully handed from one man to the other like a sack of potatoes until they reached the ground at the dark end of the building. The fight inside continued as she was carried to a wagon. The bottom boards were lifted up. Inside was a blanket.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you'll have to hide in here for a few miles," said the hawk-faced, dark-skinned man.

"Thank you, Mr. MacDougal," said Molly.

Molly took her hand, and they lay down on the blanket. Boards were placed over them, and then the wagon rolled down the street. She heard a thump only a few inches above her nose.

"This is Jessie. I'm lying down so I can talk to you. We're heading west, out of town. We have to stop to pick up cases of wine and brandy. They have to go where I'm lying, so that no one thinks to look underneath for you. Please, hold on tight, and we'll take you home."

Sarah had always hated being confined. After the last few weeks of terror it felt like she was in a moving tomb. To keep from screaming in fear she concentrated on why the Indian-looking man had a Scottish name. After a while the wagon stopped and heavy thuds made her wince. She felt as if any moment the boxes would smash through the wood and crush her. It was too noisy to talk, but as

soon as the wagon started rolling again, she spoke. Anything was better than lying there, unable to move, not knowing what would happen.

"I owe you my life," she said to Molly. "Anything I can do for you, I will." She squeezed Molly's hand. The young girl squeezed back.

"I can't believe this is happening. I'm going to wake up and hear screams again. And then he's going to come for me." Molly's voice wavered.

"No, Molly. I think the people who took us out of that place will make sure you are taken care of. They said they're taking you home."

"I don't have a home anymore. The man who said he saved me told me my family was killed."

"When was that?" Sarah wanted to keep the girl talking instead of thinking of where they were, or had been.

"In the spring. It was the first really warm day. We were sitting down to dinner when all these men rushed in. Someone held a cloth to my face. It stank, but I had to breathe. When I woke up, I was in the room I stayed in until they brought me...where I met you."

"Did you stay there the whole time?"

"Yes," whispered Molly. "He said he'd take care of me. He said he rescued me, and he'd be my father, but I couldn't see what he looked like because it was secret. He wouldn't let me go outside, but he never touched me until my sixteenth birthday." She cried quietly. "Why would he be so nice to me, and then hurt me and sell me—"

"Shh, don't talk about it, Molly. Think about a better tomorrow, and tomorrow after that." She squeezed again. Molly returned it then lay quietly.

Sarah held back her own tears. Molly had a town that cared about her. Sarah had no one and nothing. She'd come West on the Bride Train from Virginia to find a good man but found a beast instead. She had no virtue left. Too many men had touched her, had hurt her. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but she was just finishing her

second monthlies. No man had paid for her the two nights previous. That meant no baby would come from her degradation.

She'd never have children or a home now. All her dreams were gone. But she had her life, and that was more than the girl who tried to escape. She didn't even know her name, just the sound of her screams.

If she ever found the man who had promised her the dignity of marriage and debased her in a way she'd never known possible, she would do anything to bring him down. Her fingers curved into claws at the thought.

As soon as she was up to it, she would leave Molly and her friends. The child was barely sixteen and only a few men had taken her. She could be cleansed. She would not want Sarah, a reminder of her pain, debasement, and humiliation, nearby.

* * * *

Jessie laughed when a light rain started soon after they left Bannack City. It would cover their tracks and keep lazy city men indoors instead of looking for them. Henry stopped the wagon as soon as they were far enough away. Luke, Gabe, Ross, and Nevin, riding behind them, unloaded the crates and released Molly and Sarah. They created a nest between the cases with the tarpaulin as a roof for the three young women to rest in.

Shortly after they started again, a posse of horses rushed up. Sarah and Molly cried out, but Jessie told them she knew the voices.

"That was the best fight I've seen in a coon's age," chortled Frank Chambers as he rode up. "You should have seen your Ace and Trace go at it!"

"I told you that beaver hat of yours would be destroyed," said Henry dryly to Ace.

"It does have a certain *je ne sais pas*," replied Ace through bruised lips.

“That French for ‘I got the shit kicked out of me’?” Ranger’s right eye was almost swollen shut, and his nose looked more crooked than usual.

“You should know.” Sin laughed, pointing at Ranger.

Since he rode his magnificent black stallion and didn’t face the lamps hanging from the wagon, Jessie couldn’t tell what, if any, damage Sin had suffered.

“Speak for yourself,” rasped Trace. A thin line of blood trailed from a cut on his cheek.

“Damn, I haven’t had that much fun in years!” Ranger laughed, his horse dancing around the wagon. “Remember when we took on the MacDougals before Ma and Pa died? Pa laughed after he whupped our asses.” He laughed as well then remembered what else happened. He coughed and settled down fast. “Shit, sorry about that Ross, Nev. Forgot it didn’t go as good for you.”

Jessie remembered hearing how The MacDougal took a whip to Ross and Nevin. Even though they weren’t old enough to shave, they were punished for not winning. Neither side won, but it didn’t matter to Finan Senior. He believed his Clan had to be strong or they’d perish. Anyone, man, boy or woman, who couldn’t meet his standards, would either die trying or be banished.

“He’ll never touch us or ours again,” said Ross quietly. He made his horse rear, making sure he was far enough from the wagon for their safety. “Next time we’ll get together with Jessie’s men and take on all six of you Elliotts. Then we’ll see how you do!”

Ross gave a war whoop and raced ahead. Trace, Sin, and Ace followed, still exchanging jeers and catcalls.

Hours later the wagon finally rolled to a stop behind Miss Lily’s Parlor. When the tarp was rolled back, Molly burst into exhausted tears. Sarah looked close to doing the same. Jessie followed as Doc and Rosa ushered Molly and Sarah into the kitchen.

“First thing, a hot bath,” said Rosa. “Amelia MacDougal brought new clothes for you, never been worn by anyone. I’ve got two baths

set up in my bedroom. The windows in there are small and high up, but that's to keep people out, not you in. The bolt is on the inside of the door. I'm sure the girls will thank you later, Jessie, but they need time alone now. Share this with everyone."

Rose put a basket in Jessie's hands and hustled her out the door. Immediately after, she heard Rosa shoot the bolt home.

Jessie watched Frank Chambers, John Tanner, George Byers, and Dieter Arnott help unload the cases into the storeroom. Jessie opened the basket to find Rosa had made cinnamon buns. Each man stuffed one in his mouth and left silently. Ace hauled her up in front of him and set off for home. Sin and Henry followed.

Though she cursed and hollered at her brothers, they were family. Something neither Molly nor Sarah had anymore. She fell asleep against a warm chest. Someone carried her into bed and removed her boots. After covering her with a quilt, he kissed her forehead and settled his back next to hers.

"Ace?"

"Shh, you did a good job tonight, Jessie, but you need your rest. Sleep well, love."

She relaxed, secure in the knowledge that she was safe.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“...to love, honor, and obey, in—”

“I will *not* promise to obey!”

A few knowing snickers erupted from the Elliott side of the gathering. Snorts of withheld laughter from the MacDougals, standing in for Ace’s family, followed.

The more Jessie fought, the more Ace wanted her. Their last night together, when they’d rescued Molly Sinclair and Sarah Unsworth, they’d just slept. The next morning, Ranger burst in on them before Ace was able to start anything. That was too many aching nights ago.

He was delighted when Trace said they had to marry immediately as Fin planned to steal Jessie and haul her off to Texas. That meant Ace would have her in his bed all the sooner. But it turned Jessie around again, making her sputter indignantly. He planned to take that mistaken anger and turn it into passion as soon as the blasted ceremony was over. Ace told the MacDougals he was honored they wanted to host the wedding. In fact, he was glad the ceremony was close to the Double Diamond because then he had a shorter trip home than from the Rocking E.

“Yes, you will obey me,” declared Ace. He used his nine inch advantage to look down at her.

Jessie turned her snarling face to him. “No, I won’t!”

“You either marry me, and that includes obeying my orders, or Finan. He’s storming up the valley right now.”

She gulped then pressed her lips together so hard they turned hard and white. Her free hand formed a fist.

“If you crush those flowers, Bridie will think you don’t like

them,” Ace said softly.

Though his voice was soft, the emphasis was hard and determined. He hadn’t wanted to marry this woman, so far from what he desired in a wife, but marry her he would. Unlike Henry’s brother, also forced into a marriage due to being compromised, he would rule the home. Not with a fist, but by making her know what he wanted, and how she would benefit from it. Now that he understood her better, he enjoyed twisting her tail to increase her passion. He put on the expression he’d seen too often from his older brother. Indolent, bored and very, very superior.

“You can deny it all you like, but you’ll agree to marry me, and that means obeying my orders.”

She gasped. Her chest rose and fell quickly, the V of her pale green gown enticing him as she fought for words. The dress pushed her breasts high, showing a hint of cleavage. He wanted to slide his cock back and forth between them.

“I hate you,” she whispered. Her narrowed eyes and pursed mouth matched her words. The pastor blanched, but Ace knew it was the reverse side of the passion she showed in bed. One thing Jessie had in spades was passion.

“But you love my kisses.” He drew out the words, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “That will have to do for now, Jessiemine.”

“The name is pronounced Jess-a-*min*!” She poked him in the chest with her index finger. “And I don’t want your kisses.”

“Oh, you want them, Jessiemine.” He leaned over to whisper in her ear. “I’m going to kiss your hard nipples and your belly. Another few inches and I’ll kiss those swollen lips, already wet with wanting me. I’ll nibble that little button and you’ll explode with pleasure. And then I’ll do it again. And again.”

She ran her tongue around her lips and swallowed. His cock jumped at those lips, thinking of her mouth around him. She frowned, and then turned to her matron of honor.

“Even after a few years, is the sex worth being married, Beth?”

“Why do you think I put up with three of your brothers?” Beth replied in a dry tone. “Sometimes they make me furious, but”—she sighed and patted her rounding belly—“the joys are worth it.”

Jessie stared at Beth’s belly. She worried her bottom lip.

“Do you want that, Jessie?” asked Beth. “A home of your own and children to love?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“We’re not ready for that part yet, my dear,” said the pastor, “but I’ll remember you said the words.” He looked at the open Bible on his hand. “Where was I? Oh yes.” He cleared his throat. “To love, honor, and obey, in sickness and in health, from this day forward. So help you God.”

Jessie looked down at her flowers. Ace wondered if she would give in or let him win this battle but keep her determination to win the war? She thrust out her chin and set her shoulders back.

“I do.”

“I now pronounce you man and wife. Kiss the bride and seal the agreement.”

Jessie handed her flowers to Bridie with a sweet smile. It was gone by the time she raised her face to him. “This better be worth it, *husband*.”

Ace rested his hands on her waist. He tugged her forward until she pressed against his body. He knew when she realized what pressed against her belly by the way her eyes widened. She gulped, and then set her jaw once more.

He turned his head and nibbled her neck from her ear to her shoulder. While doing so he turned so his back faced the family and friends. Then he dropped his hands to her bottom. He took a cheek in each palm and squeezed. She squeaked and grabbed his biceps. He caught her open mouth with his and let her taste his tongue. She moaned and wrapped her arms around him. He lifted one knee, let it rest between her thighs and rubbed. She moaned louder and sucked

his tongue deep.

“That’s enough for now,” said Sin, whispering loudly. “The bedding should be done after the party.”

He pulled Jessie’s hands from his back. Ace sucked in air, wishing everyone was gone, so he could finally bury himself in her heat. She was more than ready.

“They’ll be fine,” drawled Trace. “Now it’s my turn to kiss the bride.”

Ace frowned as five of Jessie’s brothers and the three MacDougals lined up to kiss her. He scowled when a grinning Luke Frost, Gabe Downey, and Oscar Cutler joined the line. The Circle C bachelors were eager for a bride, but he didn’t want them touching his woman.

“Stop growling,” said Sin. “They’ll behave with all her brothers watching.” He lightly pounded his fist into Ace’s shoulder. “Let’s check if we can see Fin MacDougal yet.”

Ace let Sin pull him away from his blushing bride. Why would a woman who demanded so much sex from them those first few days blush so easily? He snagged a glass on the way out of Trace’s parlor, frowning when he realized it was lemonade and not whiskey.

Far below, a lone man on a big horse walked along the valley road. His red hair blazed like a beacon. Since Gillis MacDougal was hauling Jessie into his arms, the one riding toward them had to be Finan. He hadn’t brought a posse with him, nor did he look like he was in a great hurry to get to Jessie.

Fin had disappeared the day after announcing his so-called “engagement” to Jessie. They’d thought he’d gone back to Texas until he arrived a few days ago, telling everyone he would soon be married and off to Texas. He looked so sure of himself that Trace insisted they move up the wedding.

Ace swigged down the lemonade. He choked at the acid taste, eyes watering.

“Bridie made the lemonade all by herself,” said Sin with a poker

face. "She's very proud of herself. She says we're her uncles now, so she has eleven."

Ace nodded, unable to speak. His eyes watered. He flicked his tongue in and out of his mouth for a moment to let the acid evaporate. "I'll pass on my thanks when I see her."

Though only thirteen, Bridie's wide smile and beautiful golden-red hair already had men hoping she'd choose them in a few years. Meggie was closer to marriageable age, being sixteen. Considering they were the only young girls around, having eleven uncles gave them protection that would have helped Molly Sinclair and her family.

Miss Lily had passed the word that Molly and Sarah were doing well. Rosa, having survived years of rape, could put life in perspective for them. They were still afraid of strangers, but were less likely to cringe whenever someone moved too quickly. It would still be a long time before they were ready for visitors, especially men.

Having rescued Sarah, Luke and Gabe had a special interest in the young woman. She wasn't ready to be courted, but the Circle C had made it clear they would not tolerate any disrespect toward her. It also meant she wore their brand. They wouldn't push, but if Sarah showed interest, each would be there with hat in hand, ready to propose.

Ace tried not to think of how Jessie, travelling alone, could have been sold into the same type of hell. With her attitude, she'd attract men who enjoyed dominating a woman. They would break her body and ravage her soul, but he liked to think her spirit would survive.

His family crest pinky ring was on her left hand. A proper wedding ring was one of the things they'd get in Bannack City after they sold the steers. Perhaps they'd drive them to Virginia City instead, and make even more profit.

The bachelor plans for whores, whiskey, and gambling were out the window. He'd won the war about the marriage, but lost the battle over the cattle drive. Jessie was coming with them to drive the steers to market. He'd never let her see it, but he was proud of her in so

many ways. Of course, it was easier now that his cowboy skills were improving.

Luke strolled out of the house with Jessie's hand resting on his arm. "You want your wife back now, Langford?"

"Maybe I don't want to go to him, Luke."

Jessie tossed her head and simpered at Luke. She had learned many things while in Virginia. He'd seen many a young miss in London flirt the same way. He held his grin, managing to keep it to a lip twitch. Jessie was trying too hard to keep her mad on, and it showed.

Luke stepped away when Ace wrapped his arm around her slim waist and pulled Jessie close. He already knew what she looked like naked, from all sides. But she looked even better from this angle. He looked down, his cock jumping at the view of her inviting cleavage.

She pouted up at him, eyes narrowing. "What are you thinking about?"

"That you are mine, Jessie Bonham Elliott Langford," he said, loud enough for others to hear. He nibbled her ear and whispered. "I will slide my cock between those breasts you're showing off. You'll bend your head and take me into your mouth with each slow stroke."

She turned her head and met his eyes. He nodded, just a slight movement but enough for her to know he meant it. She opened her mouth to breathe. Her corset was designed to be worn with the dress and was too tight to allow more than a shallow pant. Beads of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. Her nostrils flared as she listened.

"I'll spread your legs. I'll kiss your feet, all the way to your pussy. I'll lick and nibble that button of yours until you explode. Then I'll put my cock where it will do the most good for both of us. I'll make you come again. Because you are mine."

"Here comes Fin MacDougal," called Luke. The parlor emptied, men spilling out to watch him arrive.

"She's married, so ye can take yer sorry carcass to Texas,"

bellowed Gillis at his oldest brother. "We dinna want ye here."

Fin drew his horse to a stop twenty feet away. He looked them over, his lip curling in disgust. "Jessie ain't enough woman fer me. I found a real woman, one who'll bear many sons fer my Clan."

"What do ye mean, ye've got a wife?" demanded Gillis.

"I found a wee lassie in Bannack City." Fin smoothed his trimmed beard and smirked. "Morag MacConacher is far more woman than that one will ever be."

He pointed at Jessie. She automatically stuck her tongue out at him. He hawked and spat to the side. "Yer welcome to her, Langford. She's so puny she'll likely die with her first bairn."

Ace automatically tightened his hold on Jessie. He knew of too many women who died in childbirth, especially small ones like Jessie. He reminded himself that Trace told him their mother was built like Jessie, and she'd had two sets of twin sons as well as three others. Though she was short, his wife had wide hips, perfect for his hands to hold and for birthing babies.

Trace pushed past Ace and Jessie to stand beside Gillis. "Get back to town before I take a horsewhip to you."

"Good idea. I'll get my bullwhip," said Jessie. She struggled to step away, but Ace kept her pinned. "Pa banned him from Elliott land after he took a whip to our horses for 'fun,'" she complained to Ace. She poked him with her elbow. "It's about time someone did it to him!"

"Settle down," said Ace calmly. "Let the others deal with Fin." She opened her mouth to squawk. "If we were on the Double Diamond, I'd hand the whip to you."

She pressed her lips together. After a moment she nodded. She turned back to Fin, showing with her expression that she wouldn't hesitate to attack.

"At least yer bloody English lord made ye wear skirts," said Fin to Jessie.

"Actually, my dear boy," replied Ace in his most cultured voice,

"Father is an Earl. That's just below a prince, for those of you uneducated enough to know."

"You're egging him on," said Jessie.

"Good," replied Ace quietly. "Every man here would love to have a piece of him for what he's done to you."

"You've said what ye came to," growled Gillis. "Get yer carcass off our land."

Fin narrowed his eyes and sneered. "It may be yer land now, but ye'll nae pass it on. Sunbird ne'er married Father, so those two are bastards." He pointed to Ross and Nevin, then looked at Amelia, nestled between them. She blanched. Ross pulled her close.

"It dinna matter what comes out of yer belly, woman. I'll own this ranch when Father dies," threatened Fin. "And I'll sell it to yer worst enemy!" He turned his horse and raced downhill, echoes of Gillis' furious bellows chasing him.

"I'll make sure he doesn't stop until he's in Tanner's Ford," said Sin.

"We'll go with you," said Luke. "In case he tries to stop along the way and make trouble."

"Thank you," said Trace. "I wouldn't put it past him to torch Jessie's new home on his way past." Luke, Gabriel, and Oscar followed Sin to the barn.

"What if your father dies before I have a son?" Amelia wiped away tears. "We could lose everything."

Jessie bit her knuckle. She turned her head, staring at the ground. She lifted her head, frowned, and looked at Amelia. "He's wrong," she said. "I'm sure Sunbird married Finan."

"If we nae have proof—"

"Sunbird told me about the ceremony a couple of times," said Jessie.

"But the proof would be in Texas," said Ross bitterly. "I can see Fin burning the marriage certificate if he got his hands on it."

"I don't think it went to Texas," said Jessie. She shook her head,

still frowning as she thought. “Before we left, Sunbird brought me home for the last time. She said she had to hide something. I remember seeing a paper with a fancy gold seal.” Her eyes suddenly opened wide. “The night I went to Virginia, Sunbird said something I thought strange. She knew I hated sewing. Even my pillow case seams were terrible.”

“You managed to sew shut our pants, socks, and other things just fine,” drawled Nevin.

“Hunh! I was very angry and you deserved it, every time,” replied Jessie. She turned to the more serious Ross. “The night before I went to Virginia, Sunbird took both my hands and turned me to face her. Your father was in the room, along with your brothers. Sunbird smiled, squeezed my hands hard, and told me I was to sew my own wedding dress when I got home. Your father laughed and said he didn’t think I could learn that much in two years in Virginia, but Sunbird asked me to promise her.”

“Did you have a sewing machine in Texas?”

Jessie slowly shook her head at Beth’s question.

“You find anything with a gold seal in that desk, Beth?” asked Trace.

Beth blinked, thinking. “I’ve never looked past the top layer.” She turned to Amelia. “I’ll look as soon as we get home. If it’s not there, I’ll tear the house apart.”

Amelia pressed her lips together hard, but tears still leaked out. Ross rolled her to face him and pulled her snug. He leaned his chin on her head. Nevin stood at her back, adding his warmth and protection. Gil came over and kissed her head.

“Dinna fret, wee one,” husked Gil. “We’ll nae be tossed off our land.”

“I’ve seen this Morag MacConacher,” said Jack Elliott cheerfully. All eyes turned to him. “She works at one of the more respectable dining rooms. Her hair’s the same color as Gillis, and she has a temper to match. Any man who puts a hand on her gets knocked to

the floor. She's this tall"—he put his hand to his nose—"this wide"—he held his hands as if circling a large tree—"and has a voice that would peel paint." Jack laughed. "I'd say Fin's found himself the woman he deserves!"

Noting most people held full glasses of lemonade, Ace held up his empty one. "To Morag MacDougal, may she put Fin in his place!"

"To Morag!" cheered the men. A moment later a dozen of them choked and coughed.

Trace, eyes smiling, nodded his approval to Ace. As Bridie's adoptive father, he'd been the first to taste her lemonade. He held an empty glass, having toasted but not drunk. He waited, grinning, while his guests caught their breath and wiped streaming eyes.

"Now that all of Bridie's wonderful lemonade is gone," he said, "shall we toast the bride and groom with whiskey?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Oh, baby girl, I missed you so much,” sighed Jessie.

She knew her brothers kept her at the Rocking E to keep Fin from taking her, but they’d refused to bring her horse from the Double Diamond. After a few toasts, the others stayed to enjoy the sunshine and party mood, but she and Ace left to go home.

As soon as she arrived at the Double Diamond she’d jumped from the wagon and run to the barn. She didn’t even want to go to the river and look at her new, as-yet-unfinished, home.

It wasn’t how most women might start their married life. She didn’t much care if Ace didn’t like it, but she’d known and loved Nightwind far longer than Ace, Sin or Henry.

The dark horse nickered as she gave her one more hug. She picked up the currycomb, humming as she worked. She looked up when Nightwind lifted her head and twitched her ears.

“Can we start over, Jessie?”

Ace leaned a shoulder against the wall, as if he’d watched her for a while. She bit her lip.

“I don’t think I thanked you for asking Trace to bring Nightwind to me.”

He sighed at the change in subject. “You’re welcome. It was the very least I could do.” He dropped his head. He shook it then snorted a laugh. “I’ll admit it. I’m jealous of a horse.”

The fact that Ace would admit such a thing proved he was trying. She could do no less.

“She’s not just a horse. Nightwind is my best friend. She was the only female on the ranch other than Sunbird and the feral cats.” Jessie

rested her forehead against Nightwind's shoulder. "She was always there for me. Always."

"I'm glad you had a friend. I hate to think what you went through. I didn't know about the beatings—"

He lifted the currycomb out of her hand and placed it in the basket. He tugged her gently to a half-barrel. He sat down, and she let him pull her into his lap. He held her tight, arms kept loosely, so she could escape if she wanted to. He inhaled a shuddering breath then let it out. She heard the strain in his voice, felt the way he held her tighter than ever before. His heart thudded against her back.

"And I'm jealous of the way you look at Trace, as if you trust him to fix anything for you. I want you to look at me like that."

She bit her lip and turned her head away. She loved her brothers and Nightwind. She remembered loving her parents, but that was long ago. She'd watched Beth and Amelia laughing with their men. They'd worked out a balance of playful threats and warnings, ones the women pushed aside whenever they wanted. She'd heard Beth and her brothers at night. Not the whispers, but the sounds of need, and of joy.

During the days she did a lot of thinking.

"You don't love me. My brothers forced you to propose."

"Ah, Jessiemine." Ace rested his chin on her head. "I wasn't forced into anything. If I didn't want to marry you, I'd have told them to shoot me."

"Why did you marry me, then? Because you want my body?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I want your body, all right. When I saw you swimming at the hot spring, I wanted to make you mine after lusting after you for weeks, thinking I could never touch you. When you rolled over, my life changed."

"You didn't act like anything changed."

"I didn't want to change. I knew what we had to do, and nothing else would intrude." His lip twitched. "Especially one bratty boy who made me horny as well as angry."

“You were angry at me because you wanted me but couldn’t have me for weeks? That wasn’t my fault.”

“Ah, Jessie, it wasn’t just your body I wanted. It’s the ferocious pixie cowgirl I fell in...” He coughed. “I fell for. That’s the woman I want at my side.”

Jessie didn’t move, or speak.

“Jessie, my parents didn’t want me. I was an extra, a backup in case both my older brothers died. Mother had parties in Kent and Father stayed at his club in London. They shipped me off to school, where I met Sin and Henry. None of us grew up with the love that you and your brothers had.”

“My parents had seven children and wanted every one of them,” she replied. “We took in Ross for a while until they died. I remember Mama saying she wished Nevin and Gillis could join us.”

“Do you want children, Jessie?” He whispered the words against her neck.

“Yes, as many as Mama. I just didn’t want a husband.” She opened her mouth to say something then closed it again.

“What is it?”

“What if they look like Sin or Henry? Will you be angry?”

He used a finger to tilt her face until they looked at each other.

“I want lots of your children growing up on the Double Diamond. I don’t care who their father is. We could adopt dozens more if you want. Just as long as you’re happy, I don’t give a damn what else happens.”

“Do you love me?”

Ace stared at Jessie for a few minutes. “I don’t know, but I want to be with you more than anyone else in my life.”

“I really love Ranger and Ross, and Trace was always my hero. But they don’t make me feel tingly like you do.”

Instantly Ace’s face changed from concerned to wanting. “Tingly? Is that what you call it?”

She nodded at Ace, biting her lip to stop a smile.

“Do Sin and Henry make you tingle as well?”

The ache between her legs increased. She nodded. He moved so his knuckles brushed against her swelling breasts.

“Maybe I’d better get you into bed and do something about that.”

“Do we need a bed? It’s a long way to the cabin.”

His eyes flared. A slow, sensuous smile appeared. It made heat flow through her pussy.

“I’m going to take all your clothes off. Slowly. Then you’ll dance for me.”

“Dance?”

“Naked, in the sun. Then I’m going to lick your pussy until you scream a few times. Maybe I’ll spank you once or twice, just to leave my mark on you. When you’re so hot that you beg me to take you, I’ll fill you with my seed.”

“What if someone comes by?”

He pinched her hard nipple through her dress. “They can watch. After I’ve had my fill for a while, I’ll ask them to take over. They’ll make you scream a few more times.”

He sent a hand under her skirt, between her legs. She thought of the warm sun on her body, all three men kissing and playing with her. She gasped when he slipped his fingers into her pussy. He tantalized her, rubbing her, but not quite on her clit.

“Now do you know why I like you to wear dresses? Any of us can take you anytime we want, as long as you’re willing. No need to pull down your pants, just unbutton, turn you around, flip your skirts over your back, and shoot home.”

He rubbed his thumb over her clit and pressed his fingers up inside her. She opened her mouth to moan, and he captured her lips. She was so needy that she came quickly. His kisses caught her gasps of release. She rested her head on his chest, heaving air into her lungs.

“You want another helping of that, Jessiemine?”

“Oh, yes, please,” she whispered.

He stood up, lifting her in his arms. He held her so her bottom

rubbed against his cock with every step. She felt it, hard and swollen, as he carried her into the sunshine.

* * * *

Ace set his blushing wife on her feet. He unbuttoned the top of her dress and unlaced the damn corset that kept her bound too tight. They both sighed in relief when her breasts escaped.

“Mmm, don’t wear that thing unless you’re riding.”

“Is that an order?”

“If an order will keep you naked except for dress and boots, then yes.”

He peeled off her lovely dress, keeping it from the dirt. He shook it out and hung it on a hook in the barn. She waited, wearing a hat, boots, and smile. He spread her legs and slid his finger into her pussy. Her vertical smile, complete with wet lips to kiss.

“Hold out your arms. I want to see everything about you.”

She did one step better, clasping her hands behind her neck. It raised her breasts so they stood out, proud in the sunshine. Coral tips as large as a quarter were tipped with dime-size nipples.

He winced when he stepped behind her. He trailed his fingers over a few white lines. He’d never seen her bare back in such a bright light before. A hot wire of rage gripped him when he realized what they were. Someone had whipped her, hard enough to rip her skin open. He kissed the scars, trailing his tongue over each as if to erase it from her life. She had other marks, normal consequences of an active life on a ranch.

Another time, he’d ask her who wielded the whip, and who ordered the whipping. If any of them came within five hundred miles of Tanner’s Ford, he was dead. Was it Finan Senior, or Junior? What had Jessie done that was so terrible that a man would do this?

He now understood why Ross needed to torture the men who’d killed his young cousin. A bullet to the brain while they waited in jail

was far too easy a death. If Ross ever caught wind of the fourth man, the ringleader, Ace would do everything he could to help bring him to justice. Frontier justice, if necessary.

“I want to see you in the sun, too,” said Jessie.

She dropped her arms and came to him. He let her remove his shirt. He pulled off his boots and pants, leaving him with a hat and an erection.

She ran her fingers over him, tickling and arousing. She kissed the scars she found, all of them natural, then dropped to her knees in front of him.

He pushed off her hat and ran his fingers through her soft brown curls. Her hair grew longer each month. He couldn't wait until he could wrap it around his cock. He hissed in appreciation when she took him into her mouth.

Since Ace faced west, he saw his partners riding home as Jessie nibbled his thighs. He spread his legs a bit to give her more room. Henry began unbuttoning his shirt before his horse entered the yard. Sin grabbed the horse's reins when Henry dismounted.

Jessie pulled back, but Ace held her still. “Henry wants to watch,” he said.

“Henry wants to do a hell of a lot more than watch,” replied Henry. He pulled off his boots and stared at Jessie sucking Ace's cock as he shucked his pants. He came closer, hesitant to interrupt.

“Henry wants you to taste him, Jessie,” said Ace.

Henry let his cock gently touch her cheek. She grasped him with her hand, keeping a firm grasp on Ace as well.

“I love your mouth on my cock,” moaned Henry.

Jessie released Ace to concentrate on the man she'd neglected so far. He looked down at her with glazed eyes. He slowly pumped his hips, trembling to keep from forcing himself deep into her throat. She held his cock with her right hand as he stroked into her mouth.

“I want to come in your pussy, Jessie,” gasped Henry.

Sin scooped Jessie up, her back to his chest. He rested her thighs

on his strong forearms, holding her legs wide. Her pussy was the perfect height for Henry's cock. She leaned back against Sin and, with a wide smile, reached for Henry.

Henry eagerly stepped forward and guided his cock home. He shuddered at full depth. He held her hips more as a guide, thrusting forward. They all watched her pussy swallow his cock, again and again. Faster and faster he pumped. He released her hips, wanting to hold her breasts instead. She wrapped her legs around him, keeping him from pulling too far out. Groaning, he squeezed both breasts. She returned the sound. He caught her lips. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close.

She arched, releasing his mouth, and cried out. Her legs squeezed him like a vise. He grabbed her hips and shouted, erupting into her again and again. When he stepped back, staggering, Sin let Jessie's feet down. He held her until she could stand without her legs collapsing.

"Let's move this party inside," murmured Sin. "We don't want Jessie to get sunburned."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jessie stretched when Sin laid her on the bed. The cabin had only one room downstairs. Right now, it was a bedroom for four people. Three cocks stood at attention, waiting for her.

“Got the sweet oil ready?” Ace’s dark brown eyes smoldered.

“Damn right,” answered Sin.

As usual when he was aroused, he looked sleepy. She knew he was anything but. She opened her legs. His eyes widened, showing the dark ring around his light blue eyes. She let her fingers trail through her sopping pussy.

“You asking for something extra, Mrs. Ace?”

Sin’s voice slid over her body like velvet, spicy and erotic. He looked at her body as a tiger would its prey. Hungry, but wanting to play for a bit before eating her. She nodded. His thick cock bobbed in agreement.

“Today’s the day I take your ass. Think of it as a wedding present.”

Her heart tripled its beat. She licked suddenly dry lips. Sin held up a glass jar. He unscrewed the lid, ever so slowly. He leaned over to place the jar on the shelf over the bed. When he leaned, his long legs brought his cock in an arch over her head. She reached up and slid her hand up the inside of his thigh. His nostrils flared, and he gritted his jaw. He released the jar and dropped his eyes to hers.

“You know what’s going to happen?”

She shook her head. Beth and Amelia had said a few things and given her hints how to make it easier for her, but she wanted to hear him say it.

“We’re going to roll you on your hands and knees,” promised Sin. “We’ll put some padding under your belly and press your head to the bed. Your ass will be high in the air, your knees so far apart that everything from your belly to your backbone is open to us.”

The erotic threat in his voice sent ripples over her body.

“First, we’ll open your asshole with some oil and a finger, just like Henry did before,” rumbled Ace. “A small finger, to start. Right inside is a tight ring. We have to stretch that ring. You remember there’s a whole lot of pleasure spots inside, but you have to be well stretched to enjoy them.”

Sin sat on the bed beside her. He rolled her onto her side, back to the wall, and massaged her bottom. He slid his fingers between her legs where she was so wet. He rubbed his slippery fingers between her pussy and bottom.

“Someone will lick your pussy to make sure you’re warm,” added Henry. “We’ll add another finger, then a third. When four fingers have you stretched wide—”

“Then I stand behind you and put my cock right here, in your ass.” Sin scratched a finger against her anus. She tilted her bottom out. He pressed the tip of his finger inside her, waking some of the pleasure spots. She gasped.

“I think she’s ready,” said Sin. “Close your eyes.”

“If you trust us,” said Ace.

She looked from Ace, to Sin, to Henry. She’d married Ace in law, but the others were hers as well. She closed her eyes and rolled onto her hands and knees. They moved her into position after building up a roll, likely a quilt, for her to lean on. They spread her knees wide. She turned her face to one side.

She shivered when callused hands roamed over her. They went everywhere. Through her hair, over her shoulders, her feet, her thighs, her forehead. Then kisses. Tongues and teeth, nibbling and sucking. A cock brushed her lips. She opened her mouth, eager to take some control. Did each man taste different? Would she learn to tell them

apart by taste?

Fingers slid over her bottom and between her cheeks. They passed her anus and slid into her pussy. A thumb lightly brushed her clit. She tilted her bottom, silently asking for more. She heard a deep chuckle. A hand slapped her bottom, exploding her calm acceptance. She tried to rise up, but two hands held her shoulders. Because she had turned her face to the wall, she couldn't even find out whose hands they were.

"Give it a moment, Jessie." Someone kissed the spot they'd spanked. "How does it feel now?"

A warmth spread from the spot. She relaxed, concentrating on the tingle in her pussy. The next slap didn't startle her so much, or the next. For a few minutes they massaged her, even lifting her a bit to reach her breasts.

"Get the oil."

She felt someone lean over her to reach it. She recognized Sin's long arm. His hand was gentle as it soothed her warm cheeks. He scratched at her anus then slid a finger in, twisting. While she couldn't always feel a cock all the way inside her pussy, she felt every fraction of an inch of that finger.

He pulled out, then used two fingers. He drilled deeper. Once again a cock brushed her cheek. She opened her eyes a slit. Henry. She grasped his wide cock with her fist and brought it into her mouth. She flicked her tongue over the head and sucked it in. On the way out she let her teeth graze the head. Henry growled and threaded his fingers through her hair, tugging in a signal for her to take more if she could.

Sin added another finger to her bottom. It stretched her more. Henry's cock demanded her attention. She pushed the tip of her tongue into the small slit on the end.

"Take me deep," he ordered.

She relaxed her throat and sucked him in, aiming his cock to rub against the roof of her mouth. He backed out again, and she rimmed

his head with her tongue.

Sin pulled his fingers out of her ass. She clenched her pussy at the loss of sensation. Someone rubbed her clit instead. She tilted her ass high, demanding more.

A set of hands grasped her bottom cheeks. They spread her wide.

“Guide me in,” grunted Sin.

She shivered. Ace must be holding Sin’s cock. What did they feel about touching the other?

The blunt tip of Sin’s wet cock slid between her cheeks. It rubbed against her pussy, almost going in. It rubbed, pressing hard, on the flesh between her pussy and ass. Ace’s fingers, still holding Sin’s cock, trailed each side.

Henry pulled his cock out of her mouth. She inhaled, panting in reaction to Sin and Ace’s touch.

“Yessss.” Sin massaged her ass cheeks in circles, spreading and compressing them. He spread her wide and flicked his tongue over her asshole. She quivered. “Now,” he ordered.

While Sin held her cheeks wide, Ace entered her ass with a slippery finger. Another joined it, and again. She relaxed as Beth had told her, bearing down as if pushing them out.

“Good girl,” murmured Sin. “Put my cock in her ass, Henry.”

The head of Sin’s cock filled her, far wider than the fingers. She clenched at the sharp pain.

“Relax, Jessie,” Sin murmured. “Take me in.”

Henry’s fingers found her clit. She breathed out, pushing her tension and pain away. Sin rotated her ass cheeks and gently pressed his cock into her. She groaned when he stopped just past her ring. It stung, like a child’s tooth that rocked on one side but was still attached. It hurt a bit, but she wanted to feel the hurt.

He pushed forward again, releasing her cheeks. Instead, he reached around her to hold her breasts.

“Damn, you feel good, Jessie. Your ass is hot and tight. You hold me like you want to keep me there forever.”

He pulled back a bit, then forward again. When he surged, he pinched her nipples. Henry slid a hand between her thighs and into her pussy. Sin thrust forward and back, slow and steady. It was the friction she wanted, the movement that woke up a dark need she'd never known existed.

"Open your mouth, Jessie," said Ace.

She caught his cock and sucked greedily. She pumped along with Sin, sucking him in when Sin moved deep, sliding him out when he pulled back.

"God, you feel so good I can't wait."

Sin sped up. She held the cock, barely in her mouth as she concentrated on the sensations in her ass. Sin panted, expelling his breath over her back. She shoved her bottom back, meeting his thrust so he went deep inside her.

"Yes!"

She met him halfway each time, her ass slapping against his groin. His balls hit her pussy with every forward thrust. Henry moved to her clit, fingers pressing directly on it now, making little circles. She grunted and raised her shoulders up. She slammed into Sin, driving his cock deep inside her ass. She exalted in every shiver of sensation.

There was nothing but Sin's cock, his balls, his hands, his breath gasping as she fought to wrestle control. The tension wound too tight. He shoved deep, Henry's fingers hit her clit just right, and she screamed, convulsing around him.

"Fuck!"

She dimly felt Sin explode inside her, rutting as if he would die. He collapsed over her and pulled her to one side. She lay there, fireworks exploding behind her eyes, until he pulled out.

Henry rolled her onto her knees again, slid his thick cock into her ass. He only stretched her a bit, as she was already prepared by Sin. Henry rolled her over, taking her with him, still attached. He held an arm under breasts, hugging her close to him. He dropped his feet to the floor and sat. She leaned a bit forward, her ass impaled, her pussy

and breasts free.

Ace kissed her lips tenderly. He rubbed his hairy chest against her eager nipples. She was ultrasensitive from her orgasm, and every touch inflamed her.

Henry spread her thighs, placing her feet outside his own. She looked into Ace's smiling face.

"You should see the grin on Henry's face now that he's finally in your ass," said Ace. "I want to fill your pussy at the same time." He brushed his lips against her. "Let's see how far we can take this. Relax and let it flow."

He knelt and kissed her pussy. His fingers and tongue caressed her swollen flesh. He sucked her clit, and she jerked, almost coming from that alone. He rubbed his cock against her opening then pressed in.

Henry raised her bottom, slightly pulling out as Ace slid in her pussy.

She quivered, her sensitive ass feeling every bit of the slow slide. Ace filled her then retreated. He flicked her nipples with his thumbs as Henry skewered her again.

Up and down, in and out, breasts and nipples and pussy and ass. Her body was nothing but pleasure. There was no yesterday, no tomorrow, only now.

"Do you love us, Jessie?"

Henry's voice sifted over her shoulder and into her ears. He kept her steady as Ace's cock filled her pussy. She quivered as their cocks rubbed together inside her, filling every bit of her. Ace thrust in and out, making waves for all three of them. He stayed slow, but went deep, hard. She caught his hips and brought him to her. Hard. Deep.

"We love you," panted Ace. "Don't we?"

"Lots," said Henry.

"Always," said Sin. He trailed his fingers over her wherever he could reach.

"So, do you love us?" repeated Henry.

Every time Ace's balls drove forward, they rubbed against

Henry's. Each time, Henry pinched her nipples between his fingers and thumb. Deep and hard. Sharp, erotic pain. Deep and hard. Dark erotic—

Her pussy full of cock, her ass full of cock, contracted as one. The explosion, greater than before, wrapped around all three of them. Henry pumped her up and down, extending her orgasm, intensifying Ace's thrusts.

Her entire body convulsed, overloaded with the dark edge of pain and pleasure.

"Yes!" she screamed as their cocks exploded.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jessie leaned a shoulder against the wall, thumbs stuck in her pants, and watched Ace shaving. Life had been smooth since the wedding a few days ago.

She'd discovered Sin was a mixture of gentle and masterful. Sometimes he would spend endless minutes kissing her breasts, belly, and pussy. Other times he demanded she submit to him. A few times she ran, taunting him. Once he caught her, yanked down her pants, put her across his lap, and spanked her. Though she screamed, within minutes she was so wet when he entered her, he reached all the way in one thrust.

Henry was still a good friend, though she now knew he had a demanding side as controlling as the other two men. He respected her, brain, body, and soul. He once said she was far better company than any woman, and most men, he'd ever met. He enjoyed Beth and Amelia as well, since they were also strong, intelligent women. She felt relaxed with him, unless he got that gleam in his eye. She loved the way his nostrils flared and his cock jutted as he stalked her. He liked to take her from behind, angling his cock so her pussy purred.

She could usually predict how Henry and Sin would behave. Ace was different.

She took his ranch orders daily, making respectful suggestions when she thought they had value. It was gratifying when he said she was usually right. While they worked, he treated her as one of his best hands, which she was.

She stood up to him when they were lovers, however. She enjoyed wrestling with him, using her agility to make up for his strength.

When they both fought hard to win, the loving was the best. Only he treated her that way, demanding she meet him toe to toe.

He met her eyes in the shaving mirror.

“Spit it out, Jessie. You want something, so ask.”

This was the hard part. She never liked asking favors. The fact he was her husband made it worse. Legally, he could demand anything from her and provide nothing. She hadn’t gone to Tanner’s Ford since that disastrous day when he humiliated her in front of the sheriff, and then Finan did worse at the hotel. But this wasn’t for her.

“I would like to go to town tomorrow. Could you rent a buggy for me?”

He flicked his eyes over her dusty pants and shirt. “Trouble not good enough?”

She dropped her head and stabbed at the dirt with the toe of her boot. Ace kept shaving, the quiet scrape of blade on whiskers like fingernails on a slate to her ears.

“Amelia told me that Doc says Molly and Sarah are ready to step outside Miss Lily’s, but they’re afraid. Since I saw them in that horrid place and won’t judge them for it, Doc said I should be the first to visit.”

Ace swished the soap from his blade and wiped it off. He splashed water on his face and used the flannel to dry. She waited patiently. She’d learned he was the type to think things through and then make a decision. Once the decision was made, he did not change it.

“I’d be pleased to escort you into town, Mrs. Langford,” he said. “Perhaps we could have dinner at the hotel and make an afternoon of it.” He winked. “Was it really that hard to ask me for something I’ve been wanting to do?”

She scrunched up her face to make a point of it and then smiled.

“I’ll be wearing the green dress I got married in, and I can’t ride Trouble in it.”

He tossed the flannel over his bare shoulder, set his feet wide, and looked down at her. He’d missed a spot of soap bubbles near his right

ear.

“If you’re wearing that dress, then I’m definitely taking you to dinner.” He stepped close and circled her waist with his hands. “I’m going to show my beautiful, smart, dangerous wife off.”

“I’m not beautiful,” she muttered. “I saw lots of beautiful women in Virginia.”

He crooked an eyebrow. “Being a lovely woman does not take away from your other strengths.” He kissed her forehead. “All those women had was beauty. You’ve got strong arms to lasso a cow.” He dropped his hands to her bottom “And strong legs to hold my cock deep in you.”

He rubbed his groin against her belly. She could feel his hard length.

“Even better is your determination to face down your fears to help two women who had their innocence ripped away.”

She poked him in the chest. “I’m not afraid to go to town in a dress!”

He caught her finger, brought it to his lips, and nipped the tip.

“It’s not the going to town, Jessie. It’s the way people will stare at ‘that wild Elliott gal who had to marry that greenhorn, Langford.’”

She dropped her forehead onto his chest. Tears prickled her eyelashes. She’d never fit in, and going to Tanner’s Ford would prove that, even here, it was the same. He tilted up her chin.

“This greenhorn is proud to have his lady by his side.”

He pulled her close and kissed her. Every day, her feelings for him grew, and her enjoyment of his kisses deepened.

“Hey, there’s work to be done!”

Ace released her lips. Sin smacked her back cheek. She elbowed him in the gut.

“We need to hire a buggy first thing tomorrow,” said Ace, breathing hard. “Mrs. Langford will be visiting Miss Sinclair and Miss Unsworth to see if they are At Home.”

He said the words just like Aunt Jessamine used to. One wasn’t At

Home unless one wished to meet the person stopping by. She thought the entire thing ridiculous. First was the expense of the ridiculous gowns designed only to impress other women. Then was wasting time going from house to house to drink weak tea and gossip with people one had seen the night before at another, equally boring, event.

“Of course they’ll be at home,” she said, changing the intent of his words. “They’ve not left Miss Lily’s since they escaped from Bannack City.”

Sin leered at her. “You going to wear that dress with the gap damn near down to your waist?”

“When Amelia fixed the ribbons on the matching corset,” she turned to Ace, “because someone was too impatient to undo them, she gave me a shawl to cover myself.”

“Can we watch you dress?” Sin’s expression raised her heat from simmering to eager. “There’s something about watching a woman put on clothes. The way she smoothes her stockings to her knees, how she slides her drawers over the curves of her ass—”

“She won’t be wearing drawers,” insisted Ace.

“I’ll need help to tie the corset,” she said.

“I’ll get the wagon,” said Sin, “but you don’t dress until I’m there.”

“That’s for tomorrow. There’s work to be done today,” ordered Ace.

* * * *

Ace held the buggy reins loosely as the horse trotted into Tanner’s Ford. For the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Kenrick Langford would appear in public. Jessie had tied the shawl over her head and around her shoulders as soon as she saw Miss Lily’s two-story Parlor in the distance. She didn’t have a bonnet, and married ladies covered their heads in public. Getting a matching bonnet was her excuse to encourage Molly and Sarah out of Miss Lily’s home.

Since Nora Dawes lived right next door, they wouldn't have to go far. However, it wasn't the distance that mattered, it was the doing.

"Sin said he told Rosa you'd be visiting when he came by this morning. She said they ladies will be dressed for a formal visit," said Ace. He slowed the horses to a walk. They passed Miss Lily's and Nora Dawes' hat shop.

"Where are you going?"

"To the end of town and back."

"Why?"

"I'm showing off my lovely wife on a beautiful September morning," Ace replied. This was as close to riding down London's Pall Mall as he was likely to experience again. If he'd been born first, he'd be the Earl of Denby. But he'd not have Jessie at his side. What he would have was debt up to his eyeballs, thanks to his father's gambling. The heir followed in his father's expensive footsteps.

Jessie sat beside him, tall and straight as they passed the few people on the boardwalk. He nodded his head at the old men outside the Mercantile. When he lifted his hat at Mrs. Emslow, sweeping the steps of her boardinghouse, she peered suspiciously at him.

The Double Diamond had little to do with the banker, Hugh Jennett, but for some reason the man always showed his dislike. In this case, he turned his back and gave them the cut direct. If they were in a proper drawing room, he might call the man out for being so rude. Here in Tanner's Ford, he had too much work to bother with pistols at dawn.

"From what I hear," said Ace quietly, "that man deserves his wife."

"Beth and Amelia call her 'the bombazine beldame,'" replied Jessie. "It means a hag. Since she blames Molly and Sarah for what happened to them, I agree. If I wasn't a lady I'd use a different word, however."

Dieter Arnott, sweeping the boards in front of his butcher shop, lifted a hand from his broom to wave. The blacksmith, both hands

full, nodded. Ace turned the buggy in a wide arc and headed back.

A boy rushed out from the large house under construction across from the hotel. Ace stopped the buggy, and the boy climbed halfway up. He grinned at Jessie but spoke to Ace.

“Howdy, Mr. Langford, I’m Billy O’Keefe. Mrs. McLeod says you’re Daniel’s new aunt and uncle. He’s my friend.”

Ace remembered Trace telling him Smythe hired the boy and his carpenter father. Billy was Daniel MacDougal’s friend, and they kept an eye on anything Smythe was up to.

“Pleased to meet you, Master O’Keefe,” said Ace. “May I present you to my wife, Jessie Elliott Langford?”

Jessie shot him a startled look when he didn’t call her ‘Mrs. Langford,’ then smiled at the boy. When she also shook his hand Billy smiled even wider. Ace reached in his pocket and took out a penny.

“Would you do me a favor and watch our wagon while we’re in town?” Billy nodded, and Ace tossed him the coin. “That’s a little something for your effort.”

After Billy saluted and got down, Ace brought the wagon to a stop in the space between Mrs. Dawes’ shop and the hotel. He tied off the horse and lifted Jessie down. They strolled along the boardwalk, pausing to look in the window of the hat shop. He guided Jessie down the path to Rosa’s kitchen door. When he knocked, Rosa drew back the bolt and opened the door. He removed his hat.

“Good morning, Miss Rosa. My wife wishes to enquire whether Miss Sinclair and Miss Unsworth are receiving visitors.”

Rosa rolled her eyes at his formal language. “Come on in, Jessie. I’m sure you could use a cup of tea after your drive.” She met Ace’s mild look with a no-nonsense one. “I will see you later. Doc’s at home and said he wouldn’t mind a visit from someone wearing pants.”

Ace hid his smile and bowed. As soon as the door shut in his face, Rosa shot the bolt home. He whistled as he retraced his steps. He

crossed the street and knocked on Doc's door.

"Thank God it's you," said Doc, gesturing for him to enter. "I love Rosa dearly, but there are too many females in that kitchen for my liking."

* * * *

Two hours later, after discussing all manner of interesting, thoroughly masculine, subjects, Ace once more knocked on Rosa's kitchen door. This time, he was invited in.

Molly, wearing a high-necked, long-sleeved white dress sprinkled with tiny pink roses, nodded shyly to him. She wore her blonde hair long, tied back with a pink ribbon like the young woman she was. Sarah had cut off all her hair. It was now shorter than Jessie's, but without the curl. She wore a severe navy serge dress with a touch of white lace at her neck and cuffs. She met his eyes for a moment then looked away.

"Look, Ace," said Jessie.

She held up a green hat a bit darker than her gown. He fought to keep his eyes on the hat and not on the bare tops of her breasts. He lost.

"Thank you," he said, nodding at Molly and Sarah. "Now she won't have to wear her shawl over her head while we eat dinner."

"Thank you for the visit," said Sarah. Her voice was low and melodious. "Perhaps you will allow your wife to visit another time."

Ace chuckled. "Jessie doesn't need my permission to visit you as long as she has an escort. I'm afraid our cabin isn't much, but when Jessie's home is built, I'm sure she would be pleased to welcome you anytime you wished."

He thought of the large house by the river as Jessie's. All he and his partners needed was a place to eat and sleep in. But her family insisted a big home was necessary as the Double Diamond was so close to town. The Double Diamond would put up any family caught

too far from their ranch in inclement weather, or if it got too late. Beth suggested the location was a good place to board children once there was a school in Tanner's Ford. Henry surprised him by immediately agreeing. After complaining for years about being the youngest of nine, he said he missed all the noise and confusion. He noted that Jessie looked uncomfortable at the idea of children.

"We'll have lots of space," continued Ace. "Including a separate guest room on the ground floor."

"Once you are settled, we would be delighted to visit," replied Sarah. "Isn't that so, Molly? Perhaps Jessie would have an extra kitten for you."

"Not in my kitchen," growled Rosa. Molly's smile faded. She dropped her head and bit her bottom lip. Rosa rolled her eyes. "All right, but only if you take care of it."

Ace silently cursed at the gratitude on Molly's face when she turned teary eyes to Rosa. To think that a damned kitten would mean so much to a child! But Molly had lost her family and her innocence, both violently.

"There's a few kittens ready to leave their momma," said Ace gently to the girl. "John Tanner's looking for a couple to keep the mice down at the Mercantile. How about I bring Jessie back in a few days with a basket of them? You could choose yours first, if that meets Miss Rosa's approval."

Rosa scowled at him, but he also caught the wink. For some reason she wanted Molly to think she was anything but soft.

This time when the door closed behind Ace, the bolt moved gently into its slot. Jessie almost skipped beside him.

"I didn't know choosing a hat could be fun," she said. "Sarah explained all about the things Mrs. Dawes had. Ribbons and lace and everything."

Ace's heart lifted at hearing Jessie behave like a young woman for once. Jessie's hand crept under his elbow. He patted her fingers and held her close.

“Do you think we have time for a kiss before lunch?”

He stopped at Jessie’s sensuous words and looked down at her. The hat suited her, pert and bright with a swath of net across her forehead that she could lift down if she wanted to be mysterious.

“I always have time to kiss my wife.”

She pursed her lips the same way she had that day in the hot spring, like an inexperienced virgin. The sparkle in her eyes proved she’d done it on purpose, daring him. He kissed her quickly on the cheek and set her walking again beside him. He shortened his steps so she could keep up with him.

“That wasn’t a kiss!”

“I’m hungry, wife. If we don’t get a seat soon, Sophie won’t have any left.” He looked at the sky. Clouds had drifted in while he and Doc talked. If he wanted a decent meal and still get home before the rain hit, they couldn’t waste time.

Jessie huffed but followed along. He planned to kiss her in the dining room in a way that would set Mrs. Jennett’s bombazine-covered chest heaving in outrage. Not that she would ever cross the threshold of anything as common as a hotel, of course.

When they passed the buggy, he noticed that Billy had put a bucket of water where the horse could easily reach. He’d ask Sophie to send a piece of pie out to the boy as an extra thank you. While he looked fairly well cared for, Ace remembered always being hungry when he was that size.

He noticed that Jessie automatically used her gloved fingers to gently lift her skirts to climb the stairs to the hotel. When they entered the anteroom and she released them, she set him a look daring him to comment. He winked, and she huffed.

The level of noise dropped for a moment when they walked into the dining room, but it soon returned to full clatter. They found a table for two near the back and settled in. The food was delicious after the quick meals Henry prepared. Jessie’s manners were as proper as his, though her appetite was far heartier than most women. After all, she

spent most the day in the saddle and, except for her generous curves, was mostly muscle.

All day, Jessie had acted as the perfect wife. She was polite, charming, and gracious. It was too good to be true. He leaned back, stirring his coffee. Sure enough, she had a calculating look, as if deciding how far to push him.

He knew she would test him. The previous time in town he'd humiliated her in front of the sheriff. He'd threatened her, insisting she show her respect by obeying him in public or he'd punish her. At the time, she thought he would beat her, though hurting her was the last thing he wanted to do.

Then Trace and Beth showed him how to do what was right for them and let everyone else go hang. Ace wasn't sure what Beth and Amelia had said to Jessie before their wedding, but he figured he was going to find out soon. He stood up and held his hand out to assist her.

"Shall we go home, now?"

"I think not," she replied. She smoothed her skirt, avoiding his eyes.

"There's work to be done and it's likely to rain."

"I want to go to the Mercantile."

She didn't try to keep her voice down. Neither did he.

"We don't need anything."

She sent him an icy glare. "I ordered some throwing knives. They should be in."

Just what he needed, his wife even better armed. He looked around the room. Quite a few men leaned back in their chairs, openly enjoying the show. Considering they had a snowball's chance in hell of finding a wife, they were happy to enjoy someone else's.

There was no better time for him to make a scene. He'd prove, to Jessie and the lazy louts, that he was the one who wore the pants in the Langford cabin. He knew his wife well enough by now to see that she was playing a game with him. The same game Beth and Trace enjoyed playing in public. He set his fists on his hips and put on his

father's most pompous expression.

"I said, no."

She shoved her chair back, the scraping noise loud in the suddenly quiet room. She stood, chin jutting out, and glared at him. "It's my money. I can buy what I want!"

"You will have what I allow and nothing more." He spoke calmly, as if disciplining a child. Her nostrils flared, and she narrowed her eyes at him. She tried to inhale but, because of the corset, could only pant. Only he knew that under her shawl her breasts threatened to escape from her dress.

"Let her have the knives," shouted a deep voice from across the room. "Maybe she can teach you to throw them half as well."

Jessie sent a wide smile in the man's direction.

"She can have the knives if she wants, but it will cost her," Ace called out.

Jessie met his eyes and swept off her shawl. She faced him, her back to most of the room, but whistles of appreciation still rose from around the room. She leaned slightly forward, emphasizing the dark space between her breasts. The space where she knew he wanted to insert his hard cock.

"I want those knives," she repeated.

He stepped close and leaned over so she had to straighten up.

"Then you'll spend four days without clothes, my choice of when and where," he growled. He nodded and waved in reaction to the whistles and cheers from their audience. She gasped. A flush rose from between her breasts to cover her face.

"I'll show you how to throw my knives," she countered.

He pretended to ponder the decision, and then shook his head. "No dice. I can figure that out for myself. The bet is, four days naked. You going to meet me, or do I raise the stakes?"

She flicked her tongue over her bottom lip. That usually went with her nipples hardening. He'd have to thank Trace for some of his suggestions for "punishment."

“I’ll”—her eyes flicked down as she thought—“I’ll cook dinner for a week.” She pressed her shoulders back and inhaled as deeply as she could. He almost bit his tongue as her breasts swelled. She liked to play dirty tricks, did she? He crossed his arms and slowly shook his head.

“You just raised the stakes, so I’ll match the bet. Dinner for four days, naked another three. And I raise you no drawers in town for a month.”

Hoots, catcalls, and the pounding of fists on wooden tables drowned out her reply, but he was sure it wasn’t polite.

“I didn’t hear your answer, wife. Care to repeat it?”

She pushed out her lower lip in a pout. It was real, not the practiced ones the London society misses used.

“I made my bet,” he said. He leaned over and whispered loud enough for most of the room to hear. “And those drawers will come off before you leave this room.”

“You rogue!” She stabbed her finger against his chest. He left it there, enjoying her rage. “Fine! I’ll cook your dinner for four days and...whatever for another three. But I will not take my drawers off in this dining room!”

A chorus of booing came from around them.

“I’ll accept the deal except for one change.”

“What!”

“I take your drawers off as soon as we get on Double Diamond land.” He remembered the darkening clouds. “If not today, then the next time we travel home in the buggy.”

A deeper flush waved up her body. She inhaled, and confined by the corset, her breasts came dangerously close to escaping. He picked up her shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders. He leaned close for a kiss. Holding the shawl closed with one hand, he slipped the other in the cleft between her breasts. She moaned into his mouth before returning his kiss eagerly. He didn’t notice anything but his wife’s body molded to his.

“Sealed with a kiss,” he murmured a few moments later, breathing just as hard as she. He raised his voice. “Shall we look for something bright and shiny for you to play with, wife?”

“Yes, husband,” she replied. She dropped her hand and, knowing she was hidden from the room, ran her fingers along his hard cock. She smiled sweetly in revenge.

“That calls for a spanking,” he murmured, too low for their audience to hear.

“That depends on how many knives I get.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Get back in there, you rascal!” Jessie gently shoved the marmalade kitten back onto the soft flannel that lined the bottom of the basket. “If I wasn’t a woman of my word, I’d leave you by the side of the road.”

She swung the basket forward and back, hoping the motion would convince the four kittens that it was time to sleep, not explore the outside world. The others settled, but the orange one was determined to make his own way in the world. He was her favorite, of course.

She avoided a patch of dung and kept plodding. She couldn’t remember ever walking this far. Maybe when she was too small to ride a horse by herself, before her parents died. Never in a long skirt, though. She couldn’t even stretch her legs enough to get a good stride.

“Jessie!”

She turned at the high voice. A buggy rapidly approached. “Thank God!”

Beth smiled broadly, unable to wave as both her hands were busy with the reins. Amelia’s arms were full of her baby niece, Hope. Jessie shuddered. She’d take a basket full of kittens over a baby any day. When Beth stopped, Jessie handed her the basket. She adjusted her holster so the pistol pointed down her back, hauled up her skirts, and climbed up beside Amelia.

“Jessie, you take Hope and let Amelia hold your basket,” said Beth. “She’s not in any condition to hold a fussy baby.”

Jessie gritted her teeth. She set the basket at her feet and held out her arms. The fiery-haired little girl eagerly came to her. Hope was warm and smelled like sage. The baby smiled and patted her cheek.

“What’s got you in a dress?” said Beth, and they started off. “The gun belt doesn’t quite match your outfit, but this *is* the West.”

“Ace and I were almost ready to go to town with the kittens I promised to Molly and Sarah, and John Tanner. Then half the valley came roaring into the yard yelling something about Fin bringing a judge to town.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” asked Amelia “I thought Ace still had that buggy he rented for your wedding.”

Jessie moved Hope’s fingers from her lips so she could talk. “They wanted to gallop off with your husbands. Ace doesn’t want me off the ranch without him, so he took the reins with him. He knew I couldn’t ride in this dress and I can’t get it off without help. So I started walking. I’m surprised you two faced dire punishment by taking off alone.”

“We had to,” said Amelia. “After Trace left, Beth found the wedding certificate.” She looked at Beth and both broke out laughing. “She put it in the book we want to lend you.” She pointed at a white pillowcase under Beth’s seat. “We have to show the paper to the judge, but you’ll bring the pillow book home.”

“Why do you call it a pillow book? Because you put it in a pillow case?”

“No, because you put it under your pillow,” said Beth, snickering. “Amelia found it in her father’s library. It has very detailed drawings of what men and women can do to pleasure each other.”

Jessie’s body flooded with arousal. Her friends laughed outright.

“If any of your men saw the expression on your face, they’d tumble you right on the side of the road,” said Beth. “Make sure you get a good look at every picture before showing it to Ace. Once they get their hands on it, they’ll want to try everything.”

Jessie laughed. “I’ll keep it until I want to do something that will make Ace think he needs to “punish” me.”

“Strategic thinking,” said Amelia, understanding at once.

Beth slowed the buggy to a walk as they entered Tanner’s Ford.

Men filled the porch of the hotel, jostling to see.

Jessie climbed down at Miss Lily's. The white lace curtains fluttered, so she knew Rosa saw her. She took the basket and hurried to the kitchen. She knocked, set the basket down, hiked up her skirts and ran to the hotel.

The three women, along with Hope, managed to push their way onto the porch, but that was as far as they got. Beth tried to use the pointed corner of the book to jab her way forward, but it didn't work.

"Get out of the way, we've got important evidence," yelled Amelia.

No one heard over the noise or, if they did, didn't care. Though Amelia hid her worry on the drive, Jessie saw she was beginning to get agitated as there was so much at stake.

Realizing she was far too short and small to do much on her own, Jessie pulled out her pistol. She stomped over to the stunned men, gun aimed at their back and began poking her way through.

"Get out of my way or I'll make a hole in your gizzard!"

* * * *

Hearing a ruckus, Judge Ambrose Thatcher tucked his long, black coat behind the pearl-handled pistol that rested, butt forward, on his left hip. He watched the crowd swirl as someone pushed their way through.

Silence fell as three well-dressed women appeared in the open space before him. Two were short with dark hair. One carried a baby whose fiery hair matched that of the MacDougals. The other held a steady pistol pointed right at him. The third woman was tall and blonde. She carried something flat and square in a white pillowcase. The two without a gun had rounded bellies.

The one holding the gun on him as if she meant business stared defiantly at someone to his left. From her expression, he doubted she remembered what she held in her hand.

“Madam, set that gun on the floor and put your hands up,” he ordered. The woman’s face flamed, but neither her hand nor her gaze moved.

“That bloody woman will *not* follow my orders!” The clipped English voice came from the direction of the woman’s gaze. “Jessie, I told you to stay home. I even took the buggy reins to keep you there. What are you doing here?”

Ambrose turned to the well-dressed man. By the way he glared at the tiny gunslinger, he must be Kenrick Langford. The man narrowed his eyes at his wife, held his left palm out, and slapped it with his right. She gulped at the obvious warning, bent over, innocently flashing what lay behind her cleavage, and placed the gun carefully on the floor. She stood up and raised her hands, still looking at her husband. She did not look cowed in any way.

“I promised Molly I’d bring the kittens today,” she said. Her voice rose over the crowd. “Even though I married you, I’m still an Elliott, and Elliotts always keep their promises.”

Ambrose broke into the glaring contest. “I presume you are Ace Langford, and this is your wife?”

He nodded, sighing deeply. “We married a few days ago. My lady doesn’t believe the word ‘obey’ applies to her. I’ll be reminding her of that as soon as we are home.” He raised his voice, adding an edge. “Jessamine Bonham Elliott Langford, curtsy to the nice judge and thank him for not shooting you.”

“I apologize, your honor.”

She sank into a deep curtsy that would be expected in the finest drawing rooms in the East. He looked at the woman beside her.

“Gillis MacDougal, is that your child?”

Gillis, who hadn’t moved his glare from his older brother, Finan, since they arrived, turned to face the door.

“Amelia? What are ye doin’ here, lovie? And ye brought the wee lassie as weel?”

He stomped forward, kilt swinging. The scowl he’d worn since

arriving faded when the baby crowed, “Da!” and held out her arms, kicking in excitement. He held her easily in one arm and tickled her. They both laughed. She was obviously well loved but, being female, would not affect Finan’s claim.

“And is that your wife beside you?” Though Ambrose knew the answer, he preferred to keep those in his courtroom unaware of his breadth of understanding. He learned long ago that a good lawyer never asks a question for which he does not already have an answer.

“Amelia’s my wife, Mrs. Ross MacDougal.”

One of the dark-skinned men stepped away from his brother. The two were almost identical, and Ambrose had not yet set in his mind which was which. Ross escorted the small, pregnant woman to a chair. She sank into it with a sigh. He kissed her cheek and crouched beside her. After making sure she was comfortable he scanned the room, making it obvious he wouldn’t tolerate anyone harming his woman. Ross was the one known as the MacDougal Devil. It suited him.

The tall blonde lifted the gun from the floor, holding it, barrel down, as if she knew how to use it. She strolled past him and set it on the table in front of his scribe, Jeffries. She kept the package in the pillowcase tight under her arm. She turned her back to Jeffries to face him.

“My name is Elizabeth Elliott, your Honor. My husband is Trace.”

She was so tall she could almost look him in the eye. He’d heard the valley women lived openly with three husbands. After seeing these women, he could see why the men didn’t object. The men had their own bonds, and the opportunity to share a magnificent wife was far better than being alone.

“I told you not to take the buggy without permission, wife.”

The commanding croak belonged to her husband, the one who seemed to be the leader of the group fighting Finan MacDougal’s claim. A flush ran up the blonde’s face, but she jutted out her jaw.

“After you left me behind I was so angry that I threw something.”

A few chuckles went around the room. "I hit one of your mother's photographs, breaking the glass. When I went to clean it up, I discovered Sunbird's marriage certificate behind the picture. I had to bring it, for Amelia's sake."

Finan MacDougal, the man who had dragged him from Helena to investigate his ownership claim, jumped to his feet.

"You said not to travel alone," continued Beth, ignoring Finan's sputters, "so I brought Amelia and Hope. We found Jessie walking on the road with her basket of kittens." She lifted her pillowcase, smiling brilliantly. "This proves—"

"It proves nothing," growled Finan. He stared around the room. The closed faces made him erupt. "'Tis false! Father nae married Sunbird. He'd nae disgrace Mother!"

The room erupted in yells, mostly against Finan.

Ambrose rested his thumbs on his belt, careful not to touch his pistol in challenge. He looked around the room, memorizing each face. Jeffries, a lawyer learning the business, stood up as well. The smarter ones in the group soon hushed the others until only a few rumbles continued in the back corners.

"If you cannot be quiet, I will clear this court." He scanned the group. "I am Judge Ambrose Thatcher. I have come to this town at great discomfort to hear evidence for and against the future ownership of the MD Connected Ranch. Finan MacDougal, you will sit to the right of the table. Those in disagreement, sit to the left."

He watched as they settled and then nodded cordially. He turned his back to the crowd and faced the witnesses.

"One by one, stand and state your full name and where you reside," he said. He confirmed names and faces as they spoke. Trace, Beth, Ranger, and Patrick Elliott of the Rocking E and Bitterroot ranches. Gillis, Ross, Amelia, and Nevin MacDougal of the MD Connected. Kenrick and Jessamine Langford, Charles Statham, and Henry Bennett of the Double Diamond.

"Thank you. However, unless you are directly involved, as in have

MacDougal as a surname or evidence to present, take a seat with the general public. And take that baby with you!”

Trace tickled the baby and carried her to the side with the others. That left five of them on the left and Finan MacDougal to the right. The man had recently married, but said his wife was upstairs resting. Ambrose had seen, and heard, the imposing woman during dinner. She’d made it clear she was not pleased with her new husband’s drinking, and that it would stop. It was just as well she wasn’t in the room as he doubted anyone could keep her quiet. He waited until Jeffries finished his notes and bobbed his head to say he was ready.

“Do you agree, gentlemen, that the last will and testament of Finan MacDougal, Senior, dated 1870, states that, upon his death, unless a legitimate male grandchild is alive on the MD Connected Ranch, all MacDougal property passes to his eldest son, Finan Junior.”

“Aye,” said Gillis, though he gritted his teeth while doing so.

“Aye,” replied Finan smugly.

From the crowd’s rumbles, it seemed that information was not common knowledge.

“Mr. Finan MacDougal states that, as his father never legally married his second wife, the Indian woman known as “Sunbird”, Ross and Nevin MacDougal are illegitimate and, therefore, cannot inherit. As such, any issue from their unions would not be counted as heirs. Unless Gillis remarries and has a son, all property, including the disputed ranch, will therefore pass to Finan MacDougal, Junior, upon their father’s death.”

Though Gillis growled, he didn’t jump up and bellow, as Sheriff Chambers had warned him was likely. Perhaps it was Amelia’s hand resting on his arm which held him back. Thatcher understood the power a well-loved wife could have over a man, as well as the vindictiveness of one scorned.

“Gillis, Ross, and Nevin MacDougal state that Finan Senior did marry Sunbird in a legal ceremony. Is there evidence to prove this

fact?”

“Yes, sir. I have the marriage certificate in here,” said Beth Elliott.

She fumbled in the pillowcase and brought out a large, thin, book. He saw “Sinful Pleasures” stamped on the dark cover in gold before she flipped it over. Her face turned a shade of deep pink.

He pulled his coat around him like a formal robe to hide his swelling member. There was a time he and his lady spent many an hour reading, and practicing, such poses.

Trace Elliott’s unmistakable grumbles were hushed by someone. The man’s wife brought a pillow book, in a pillowcase, to his court? Ambrose was beginning to understand why these women needed three men to keep them in line.

“You had to choose *that* book to carry it in?” whispered Ross MacDougal loudly to Beth. His wife smacked him on the belly with the back of her hand and told him to hush. He laughed quietly, picked up Amelia’s hand, and gently kissed it. He relaxed in the chair, keeping her small hand in both of his dark ones. Nevin also loosened up. Obviously, they also knew what was in the book. He strolled closer, curious.

“I had it ready to lend to Jessie,” muttered Beth as she opened the book. “I didn’t want to take a chance of crushing the certificate, so I brought it along.”

Ambrose caught flashes of explicit drawings as she flipped through the pages until she found the one she wanted. He made sure his coat was still closed. He had half a mind to hold the book as evidence for a few days.

Beth carefully removed a sheet of thick paper. Nevin grabbed the book from her and stuffed it back in the pillowcase, chuckling. She elbowed him, causing him to grunt, and held out her evidence.

He nodded his thanks and took it from her. Someone very proud of their penmanship had used the opportunity to create something special. There was an ornate gold seal on the bottom right, complete with red wax and ribbons. It was marked with an imprint. He looked

closer, tilting the paper into the light.

“The stamp on this certificate came from Fort Laramie,” he said. “The date is 1846. The husband’s signature looks like Finan MacDougal. Beside it is an X and a drawing of a sun with a bird in it.” He looked at Ross. “Were you born after 1847?” Ross nodded. Ambrose looked at the bottom of the page. “I recognize the names of the army officers who stood as witness.”

He walked over to the table and picked up his gavel.

“This wedding certificate proves Ross and Nevin MacDougal are legitimate. They and their legal heirs may inherit property from Finan MacDougal, Senior.”

He banged the wooden hammer hard against the table. The group jumped to their feet, all hugging the tiny woman between them. Now that he looked closely, he saw the resemblance between Gillis and his dark half brothers.

“It’s a forgery!” shouted Finan. He shoved his chair back so fast it crashed behind him.

Sheriff Chambers moved to his side, though Ambrose didn’t expect the older man could hold the furious Scotsman. The judge waited until the room was quiet.

“Be quiet, Mr. MacDougal, or I’ll be forced to find you in contempt.” He spoke mildly, knowing he had the law behind him.

Finan glared around the room. “This doesn’t make a damn bit of difference.” He pointed at Amelia. “Unless she births a living son before Father dies, ’tis all mine!” He stormed from the room, cursing in what must be Gaelic.

Ambrose hit the gavel on the table again. “Court’s over, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced.

Trace immediately went to his wife. He tried to take the pillowcase from Nevin, but the younger man shook his head, smirking, and handed it to Jessie. Trace kissed Beth on the forehead and guided her to Ambrose.

“Would it be disrespectful to buy the judge a welcome to Tanner’s

Ford drink?”

“Is that book what I think it is?”

Beth looked at the pillowcase Jessie hugged to her chest and her color deepened.

“I believe that blush answers my question.” He held out his hand to Trace. “I have a few things to speak with you about, Mr. Elliott. In fact, I owe you a drink. Will you be escorting your lovely wife home, or will we have a few moments?”

Trace used his fingers to send out a shrill whistle that cut through the crowd. “There’s a keg of beer cooling at Baldy’s Saloon. Go help yourselves.”

It took less than three minutes to clear the room of the rabble rousers.

“You do realize Finan won’t let this stop here,” said Ambrose to the cheerful valley group. “He’s the type of man who needs a physical answer to a problem. A few words will not make him believe something he disagrees with.”

Trace, along with the eight other men, nodded.

“He can have all the physical he wants. We’ll take him in a fair fight, one on one until he gives up.”

“Unless he takes all of you down.”

Trace’s eyes gleamed. “He can try.”

Chapter Thirty

Jessie and Ace returned to town the next day. Since she and the other women were escorted home immediately after the excitement, she hadn't been able to see the kittens settled or find out what happened about Fin. Ace said he didn't mind showing her off again, as he liked seeing her in the green dress. She'd already decided to visit Amelia and find another dress or two. This time she'd get one she could get on and off by herself!

The first thing she did was discover that Molly and Sarah each had a black and white kitten. John Tanner was pleased with the active marmalade, and his wife, Patsy, liked the last black and white one.

She was relieved Finan had left, but Ace said the rest of them had looked forward to a good fistfight. He cheered up when he found out Finan got stinking drunk that night, which his wife did not appreciate. She hauled him, well hungover, onto the stage early the next morning to meet the railroad, and from there, travel to Texas.

Since the judge didn't want anything to do with the new Mrs. MacDougal, he decided to stay on for a few days. His scribe, not wanting to leave his wife alone longer than necessary, gritted his teeth and climbed in the stagecoach with the newlyweds.

Last night, and all morning, Ace hadn't said anything about her coming to town against his wishes. None of them did more than kiss her forehead last night. Ace fell asleep quickly and was up first. Though she knew he was curious about Amelia's book, he hadn't asked to see it. Neither had Sin or Henry.

Ace had been polite but a bit distant, though the other two had a gleam in their eyes that made her wonder what was going on. Ace

seemed determined to get home quickly, though it was a lovely sunny day. He kept frowning, looking around as if trying to find something.

“Thank you for taking me to see the kittens,” she said. It was the only way she’d apologize for going to town on her own. “I wanted to make sure they found good homes. Molly and Sarah are so happy, you’d think they were children. And I’m glad John Tanner got the marmalade one. That one is so bold he needs a lot of room.”

“You’re welcome.” He sat up and nodded, as if he found what he was looking for. He pulled on the reins and cut their speed to a walk. “It’s a warm, sunny day. Perfect for what I’ve got planned.”

He looked far too pleased with himself. She narrowed her eyes when she saw his leer, the one that meant she was going to be pleased whether she wanted to or not. So far, she always wanted to, not that she’d let him know that. But she would make him work for it.

“What plans?”

“Surely you remember the last time we took the buggy to town? You demanded a set of four throwing knives, a new bridle for Nightwind, and a blanket for Trouble. We made a deal and it’s time to pay the piper. We’re on Double Diamond land now. You also need a lesson in obedience for yesterday.”

She remembered that bargain. In fact, she’d thought about it last night while he snored beside her. Wondering what he would do, and when. No wonder he was eager to take her to town, and even more to bring her home.

She tensed, hiding her eagerness when he aimed the buggy toward the cottonwoods lining the river. She held herself still as he found the right place to stop and then made sure the horses were tied. She almost screamed in frustration as he slowly climbed off, taking his time. He walked around the wagon, whistling as he kicked his feet in the grass to make sure no snakes lingered.

“Yes, this will do fine,” he said, as if to himself. He turned to her and held his hands out. “Well?”

“Well, what?” she asked, pretending innocence. She let him lift

her down, pulling away as soon as her feet were steady.

“We can do this slow and easy, or fast and hard,” he said. “Personally, I prefer some of each. Let’s start with slow.”

He hunched down in front of her and began folding her skirt from the hem, back and forth until her knees showed. So did the bottom edge of her drawers. He kept going. She gulped when he reached the top of her thighs.

He rested his head against her belly and inhaled.

“Hold your skirt in place,” he said.

She curled her fingers around the dress material. He slid his hands up her thigh, over her belly to her waist. Before she realized it, he began pulling her drawers down.

“Move your feet apart,” he ordered.

She took tiny steps to each side until he was satisfied. He gently tugged her drawers, turning them inside out as he rolled them down. He eased them over her bottom and pulled them away from her sopping pussy, weeping for his touch.

She put a hand on his head to steady herself as she stepped out of her drawers, one leg at a time. He ducked his head and kissed her pussy. She squeaked and let go of her dress to hold onto his head with both hands. He pressed her feet farther apart so his tongue could lick her swollen folds.

She echoed his muffled groans and bent her legs slightly to give his tongue even better access. Too soon he pulled back out. She stood there, shaking, as he got to his feet.

“Do not move,” he said, holding his finger up at her in warning.

In a moment he was back with an old quilt. He laid it on the grass. After smoothing it carefully he looked her in the eyes. His were dark and wild, his expression matching his mood.

“Lift up your skirts and kneel down,” he ordered quietly. His body seemed to vibrate with tension. She hesitated.

“How many knives, Jessie?”

She swallowed. “Four.”

“Four knives and something for both your horses.” He walked around her, keeping on the grass. “You know what that means.”

“A spanking?”

She squeaked the words, both horrified and eager. Horrified that she would welcome such an act and eager to feel the explosion that would follow.

He pointed to the quilt and raised his eyebrows.

She understood his unspoken “don’t make me tell you twice.” She gathered up her skirts and knelt at the center of the quilt. When she placed her hands down, her skirts fell around her.

She bit her lip when he settled behind her and lifted them onto her back. The September sun touched her bottom. So did his hands. He pressed her head down until she rested her forehead on her arms. A cool breeze flowed over her heated flesh. She stayed there, knees far apart and bottom high, while he moved.

His naked cock brushed against her thigh just before his hand rested on her bottom cheek. He massaged her bottom with one hand and slid the other between her legs. He finally touched her clit, but removed his fingers a second later.

He pressed her cheeks apart and slid his tongue along the crease, as far down as he could reach. He pressed his fingers inside her pussy, and she clenched. He chuckled and backed away. A moment later she felt his cock probing her. He rubbed back and forth between her pussy lips, his cock rubbing her clit every time it passed. She was just getting into his rhythm when he surged his cock into her. She arched her back, urging him to go deep, but he stopped.

“Beautiful,” he murmured. “My cock filling my wife, on my land, surrounded by my cattle.”

She held back her taunt that she might be his wife, but the rest was shared with his partners. But not her. When the time was right, she’d insist she buy a quarter of the Double Diamond. Like him, she wanted to own the land.

He began moving, but very slowly. She put all her concentration

on each inch as he moved forward. When his balls tickled against her, he changed direction. So slow, it was agony. She tried to hold him with her inside muscles, but he ignored her.

“Can you not move a bit faster?” she complained.

“This is part of your punishment,” he answered without breaking his rhythm.

She put up for it as long as she could, but when he pulled almost out and began ever so slowly drilling in again, she pressed her hands down, raised her shoulders, and slammed back until her bottom hit his belly.

Smack!

She yelped at the sting from his hand on her cheek. He pulled almost out of her. Furious, she did it again, taking him deep. She expected the sting on her other cheek. It revved her anger and need. Ignoring the burn, she banged her bottom against him, taking what she wanted.

She managed only twice more when he caught her around the belly and kept her tight against him. Her swollen flesh throbbed, wanting more. Her head spun as she could not inhale thanks to the corset. He held her there for a moment and then pulled all the way out.

He pulled her skirts over her bottom. She lifted her head and glared at him. His shirt was off, his pants around his ankles. His hard cock glistened in the sun from her juices. She wanted to scratch his smirk with her nails.

“Any more and you’d scream,” he said smugly. “You wouldn’t want to get the J Bar C cousins all riled up. I’ll happily share with my partners, but those boys can find their own woman.”

He pulled up his pants, buttoned them, and then held out his hand. He helped her into the wagon. She bit her tongue when he refused to let her sit on the folded quilt. Instead, her stinging bottom rested on the buggy’s hard leather cushion. Ace brought the buggy back on the path but stopped the horse and turned to her.

“Take off your dress.”

She gaped. They were on the main valley path, still far from the cabin.

“Three days naked, when and where I say,” he reminded her. “Now and here. The rest of the day will count for a half. That will leave two-and-a-half days of my choice.”

She pressed her lips together to keep back the snarl of refusal she so wanted to make. As soon as she was alone, she would start practicing with all four knives. She’d imagine parts of him wherever the blades landed.

She took her time, though he rushed her through the parts she couldn’t manage herself. He let her keep her stockings and boots, as well as the hat she’d been so proud of. This time he let her sit on the quilt beside him as the leather seat was cracked.

She sat erect, her breasts bouncing thanks to the rough road. It meandered through the trees and shrubs. She said nothing. Usually she would be chilled, the late afternoon sun cool, but her anger, and need, kept her warm.

He slowed when they reached the building site. The walls were now head-high. Her head, not Ace’s.

“Time to take ownership of our home,” he said.

He brought the patient horse to where it could crop grass and climbed down. He motioned for her to come to him. Since she wasn’t wearing a dress to get in the way, she turned her back to him and climbed down the side. He pulled the quilt off the seat and handed it to her. When she took it, he swept her into his arms and carried her toward the building.

He had to go in sideways through the door, but he held her the entire way. The main room was huge. Though it still had a dirt floor and was open to the sky, it was hers. The ranch might belong to the men, but this was her home, built by her brothers, to meet her needs and theirs.

He set her down in what would be a small bedroom. Her bedroom,

anytime she wanted to be alone. Once more he laid the quilt down. The walls cut the breeze while the sun was high enough to shine over them. She walked around, pretending not to notice as Ace stripped.

“Jessie,” he said quietly. There was no demand in his voice.

She turned. He held his arms open in invitation for a hug. His hard cock invited even more. Her nipples hardened further.

“I know we didn’t start off very well,” he said, “but I want you for my wife.”

“Why?”

He dropped his hands. “I realized I want a strong partner beside me, either riding in the saddle or lying in our bed.” He smiled ruefully. “I never imagined a woman like you. Someone so tiny but who can wrestle me to the ground now and then. Put pants and a shirt on, sit on a horse, and you can work rings around me. For now,” he added.

He gave her a speaking glance to say the situation would change as soon as he could gain the knowledge and ability he needed to best her. She recognized the same need to be best that she shared with every one of her brothers.

“Yet when you wear a dress, every man is jealous that you chose to take my name.” He held up his hand before she could speak. “I know it wasn’t a choice at the time, but I hope it will be now.”

He held out one hand.

“All I have to offer is myself, our land and cattle, and my partners. Even this home isn’t mine.”

He frowned as if it galled him greatly. She expected it did, which was likely one of the reasons why her brothers did it.

“I can’t see living on the Double Diamond without you at my side. I want you in my bed.” He sighed. “In our bed, whenever you choose, with any or all of us. Jessamine Bonham Elliott, will you be my wife?”

She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Why?”

“Why do I love you? Because you are the most ornery, fascinating female that I’ve ever met. You make me hard every time I think of you.”

“Hold it!” She held up a hand. He stopped, frowning in confusion.

“Repeat that first sentence.”

His frown deepened as he thought. “I love you? Is that what you mean?”

“Is that a question? Because if you’re not sure—”

He strode toward her, cock pointing the way. He wrapped his arms around her, warming her. His cock rubbed against her belly as he hauled air deep into his lungs.

“I realized how much I love you when you put on a dress to go into town as my wife, just to make those two young women feel respected.” He kissed the top of her head. “In the hotel dining room, when you sassed me and almost begged me to spank you, I was so bloody proud that you stood up to me and demanded what you wanted.”

He released her enough to meet her gaze.

“I love you, Jessie. But do you love me?”

She frowned. “Sometimes I want to kiss you and smack you at the same time. Beth and Amelia say that’s part of love.” She shrugged. His eyes shot to her breasts, jiggling from the action. “I don’t know why, but yes, I love you, Kenrick bloody Langford.”

He pulled her close to him again, rocking her side to side.

“Want to prove it, Mrs. Langford?”

The teasing tone was back. His cock throbbed against her belly.

“How are you going to do that, Mr. Langford?”

He grasped her upper thighs and lifted her. Her legs splayed far apart. She grabbed his shoulders to keep from falling back. He stared at her, almost snarling, as he guided her onto his cock. When he was hilt deep, she wrapped her legs around him.

“Every part of this house,” he said. Holding her back cheeks, he walked around her home. He raised and lowered her every time he

stopped. The position ground her clit against him. By the time they entered what would be her room, she'd had enough teasing.

"If you don't finish this, Ace Langford, I am going to cut it off!"

He laughed and set her on the quilt on her back. It wasn't a position they used often, but she didn't complain. He smiled gently down at her and smoothed her hair off her face.

"This home may not be mine, but you are," he said.

He settled between her thighs, holding himself up with his hands. She lifted her bottom so that his cock angled in such a way that it rubbed against that wonderful spot inside her pussy. His thrusts increased in speed and depth until he pounded against her. The quilt moved every time he filled her full.

"You're mine," she said, smiling at his feral grimace.

"Mine!" he replied. He dropped himself onto his elbows and increased speed. She could barely keep up, tension swirling inside her.

"Do it, Jessie," he ordered. "Scream my name when you come!"

His chest hair rasped her nipples, his cock filled her.

"I love you!" he growled.

"Oh, Ace!"

She shattered, barely hearing him roaring her name in return as his seed flooded into her. After a moment he rolled onto his back, taking her with him. She rested her head on his heaving chest, gasping like a fish. He wrapped his arms around her.

A long time later he cupped a hand around one bottom cheek and smiled up at her.

* * * *

Ace couldn't imagine living a day without this frustrating, demanding, wonderful woman.

"Something in me needs to claim you as mine, Jessie, but I don't want to own you."

“Damn good thing,” she growled. He knew she was only partly joking.

“What about Sin and Henry? Do you love them as well?”

She nodded. He relaxed a bit, knowing they loved her as well.

“You’re all so different. I’m glad I don’t have to choose between you.”

“Shall we go home now?”

“If I’m with you, Mr. Kenrick bloody Langford, I’m already home.”

“I told you what would happen if you swore,” he said.

She pushed on his chest, but he held her tight. She tickled him until he let her go. She scrambled to her feet and ran toward the door, but he caught her around the waist.

“Truce until we get to the cabin,” he said. “The others should be coming back about now. I’ll let them take turns paddling your ass before we show you who’s boss.” He trailed his fingers through her swollen pussy.

She stuck out her tongue, but Ace knew the thought of what they might do to her kept her aroused. He left the quilt behind and carried her to the buggy. He set his shirt on the seat to protect her bottom and put on his pants.

He couldn’t miss the opportunity of having his naked wife in the wagon. Her breasts swayed with every bump and roll. The sun was warm but not so much that her nipples weren’t tight from the cool air. Or perhaps they were tight due to what they’d just done.

Sin and Henry greeted him with nods when they rode into the yard.

“Everything’s ready,” said Sin. “What about you?”

“I’ve got the item in question.”

Henry lifted his hands and motioned she was to climb down. She pouted when he didn’t take advantage of her nakedness. That wouldn’t last long.

Keeping his back to Jessie, Ace handed one thin band to Sin and

Henry, keeping the third for himself. She looked at them warily as they stalked her, but held her ground. Ace knelt in front of her on one knee, with Sin to his right and Henry to his left. They held out their hands, a twisted ring of metal on each.

"I know I said we'd look for a ring when we drove the cattle to Virginia City, but we couldn't wait," he said.

"A ring?" She bit her lip, her chin quivering.

"Three rings. One from each of us," said Ace.

He took the bands from Ace and Henry and twisted them to make one, interconnected, ring. Sin took her left hand. He pushed the ring on as far as her knuckle.

"I love you, Jessie," said Sin. "Even though you're the most frustrating, cantankerous woman I've ever known." He kissed her hand and passed it on to Henry.

"I grew up with five older sisters and thought I knew everything about women." He shook his head and gave her a half smile. "I learn something new from you every day. I wanted adventure, and, woman, you challenge me every moment. I love you, Jessie." He gently pushed the ring the rest of the way.

She looked at Henry, then Sin, and turned to Ace.

"I don't know what to say, other than I love you all."

"Why don't you tell us where you hid that *Sinful Pleasures* book?" Ace leaned forward and kissed her belly. "We could take it with us to the hot spring and see what it's all about."

"Trace said we might particularly like page fourteen," said Sin.

"Nevin said page eight is his favorite," said Henry.

Jessie turned to Ace. "What do you think?"

"I think we should load this buggy up with quilts, soap, food, and our gorgeous wife, and spend the afternoon at the hot spring. We'll open that book at page one and work our way through as far as we can go. We'll come home, do the chores, and then continue where we left off. That suit you, wife?"

While he spoke, Sin and Henry's fingers roved over her body. Her

eyes shone as she looked at him with eagerness.

“Beth and Amelia say that pages twelve, sixteen, and twenty-eight are the best, but if you want to start at the beginning, husbands, that suits me fine. Just as long as you love me.”

Ace looked at his partners. They replied as one.

“Forever.”

THE END

WWW.REECEBUTLER.NET

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I admire those who choose adventure and the chance of a better life elsewhere. *Compromised Cowgirl* tells the story of three men who did just that. So did my ancestors.

In the eighteen hundreds, the feudal right of primogeniture ruled England. This meant the eldest male inherited everything. William, my ancestor, was the third brother of ten children. Just like Ace, Sin and Henry, he sailed across the Atlantic and found a better life.

I don't have their need for adventure. I'm of medium height, medium build, and I sit in an office in front of a computer for my day job. To be honest, I'm rather boring. It's the characters in my head who have adventures.

My writing does give me an excuse to do interesting things as research. In August of 2010 I spent two weeks driving around southwest Montana, researching the fictional town of Tanner's Ford. I fell in love with the wide blue skies and wonderful people.

I came home with a suitcase full of research books, a camera full of photos and wonderful memories to bring to life through my characters.

If I'm not at my day job, you'll usually find me in front of my keyboard, surrounded by pictures of hunky cowboys, crafting the lives of Tanner's Ford heroes and Bride Train heroines.

Also by Reece Butler

Ménage Amour: *Cowboy Sandwich*

Ménage Amour: Sequel to *Cowboy Sandwich*: *Cowboy Double-Decker*

Ménage Everlasting: Bride Train 1: *Barefoot Bride for Three*

Ménage Everlasting: Bride Train 2: *A Contract Bride's Triple Surprise*

Available at

BOOKSTRAND.COM



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com